

Episode 169: Jonathan took the wheel

Do you know how you would react, in an emergency situation?

The first time I remember being put to the test with something like this is when I was 18 years old. I was just driving, by myself, on a sort of rural road here in Florida one morning. And as I drove down this road, I could see something odd up in the distance. It was a car, off the road – and it was upside down.

Probably most of us have approached accident scenes like this. You'll see one or two cars that have obviously crashed into each other, and you see fire trucks, and police cars, and probably an ambulance or two, to take care of the injured people.

But as I approached this upside-down car, there was none of that. No emergency vehicles, no one walking around, just no activity at all. So, as I pulled over and got out of my car, I kind of assumed that this must have just happened. And 18-year-old me was thinking, I'm probably going to go over to this car, and find dead people inside. Or, people that might be still alive but they're badly injured. And this was before cell phones so I couldn't just call it in.

I walked over to the car and got down on my hands and knees and looked inside. And I was happy to find that there was no one in that car. Whoever was driving had apparently already left the scene. And a few minutes later, a state trooper rolled up. He told me that someone else had called it in an hour or so earlier, so he was there to check it out and make a report.

There were a lot of people who saw that car and just kept driving. And I get that – seeing or dealing with a potentially traumatic situation is not for everyone. Honestly I wasn't sure I wanted to deal with it either.

My guest today, Jonathan, was put into an emergency situation like that once. He was the passenger in a moving car when he noticed that the driver, his cousin Paul, had passed out. They were gaining speed.

And up ahead were pedestrians.

Scott

You were a junior in high school when this happened. How old were you at that time?

Jonathan

I would have just turned 17.

Scott

17...

Jonathan

Yep.

Scott

Man, such a young age to go through something this dramatic. It's kind of crazy.

Jonathan

Yeah, it definitely was.

Scott

How popular was the air duster thing at that time?

Jonathan

It was. I would have to say a lot of people were doing it. I remember some kids, even in class, would hide it in their coats and then take a hit of it in class. so it was just kind of going around the school - something stupid kids were doing.

Scott

So did you ever try it?

Jonathan

Yeah, I did try it. It's hard to explain. We called it the "Wah wah." When you do it - I don't know if it takes the oxygen out of your brain or what - you would just hear like a "Wah wah" and then it would go away. I mean, it was pretty quick. I mean, there's big warning labels on it that say it could freeze your lungs. I mean, yeah, it's not a good deal.

Scott

But at the time, did you feel like it was relatively safe or were you aware of the bad side effects?

Jonathan

No, I wasn't. I think we were just trying to be cool or- I don't know. Everybody was doing it, so I think we just didn't think of it that way.

Scott

Your friend, Paul - he was actually your cousin, right?

Jonathan

Yeah, he was my cousin. We grew up together and we were very close and, I would say, best friends at the time. He was a little bit of an outcast. He didn't play sports and stuff like I did. We just grew up together and stuff. That's just what happened. We became very good friends and hung out a lot.

Scott

Was it pretty well known around the school that Paul was into the air duster stuff?

Jonathan

I don't know specifically about that. He just was known as, like I said, an outcast. He found out somehow that we could do this, so he showed me and some friends. We were all trying it at the time and just kind of being stupid - having fun being dumb kids, I guess.

Scott

The day this happened, what day of the week was it? Do you remember?

Jonathan

I don't remember what day. It was in the middle of the week, I remember.

Scott

And pretty much a normal day, right?

Jonathan

Yeah, normal day. Went out to go to lunch. Our high school had an open campus, so they had the option to either stay in the cafeteria or leave for lunch. Obviously, a lot of us - majority, I'd say - 90% of the school would leave for lunch. We had an hour for lunch. I remember we went to his house on the day of the accident and it was a pretty good trek out there, so we knew we had time to go out to his house and have lunch and then get back to school.

Scott

Alright, so you're coming back, and Paul was driving. What kind of car was it?

Jonathan

He was driving a green Honda Civic, and it was his mother's car. I don't remember the year exactly, but I know I remember the green Honda Civic. We're coming back and you take a right-hand turn into the parking lot. For some reason, as we were entering the parking lot, he decided that he wanted to take a hit off of the air duster, so he did it. I don't know if he thought somebody would see him, thought it'd be cool or whatever.

So, we continued to drive through the parking lot. I looked over and, all of a sudden, his head slumped. His head wasn't in his lap, but he slumped over like he had passed out and I thought he was messing with me. So I hit his shoulder a little bit, "Hey man, quit messing around. There's kids walking" and stuff. Then, I kind of realized what was— he wasn't responding to me. So then, I didn't start to panic, I was just like, "Oh shit. Wake up! Hit the brake or whatever." I thought maybe he'd come to, so we could hit the brakes and stop. I could drive to Park or whatever, but that was not the case.

Scott

And you mentioned earlier that this effect is gone pretty quickly. It didn't seem like it went away very quickly this time.

Jonathan

No, it did not. I don't know if, like I said earlier, it depletes the oxygen in your brain. All of a sudden, he just passed out and here we are. We're in the parking lot at lunchtime.

Scott

And how fast were you going at that time?

Jonathan

The speed limit coming into the parking lot was, like, 20 miles an hour. But as he passed out, his foot would hit the accelerator, so I noticed our speed started to pick up pretty significantly. As I was trying to wake him up, I bet we were doing about 30 miles per hour and continuing to accelerate.

Scott

This is like the worst case scenario.

Jonathan

Oh yeah, it was. I can't hit the brake - he's a bigger guy, so I can't. I don't know what I was thinking at the time. I just tried to wake him up, "Wake up! Please wake up and stop!" Because it's not going to end well if he doesn't wake up.

Scott

Did you consider maybe grabbing the gear shift, putting it in neutral?

Jonathan

After the fact, I did, in hindsight in 2020.

Scott

Or the emergency brake right there in the center.

Jonathan

Right, yeah, and I never did. I was so focused on just, "Hey, wake up, please!" And he was a jokester. So I was kind of thinking, like, "Well, is this a joke?" But no, it was not a joke.

Scott

So as you're kind of panicking, what do you see ahead of you?

Jonathan

I understood that he's not going to wake up, so what was going to happen next? I looked up. Now, we're going faster. We're accelerating and there's a lot of kids walking because there's a crosswalk to go into the high school. I look up and there's a bunch of kids. Then, I saw a couple and they were holding hands. Everything just slowed down. I don't know. Have you seen "Saving Private Ryan"?" This is a weird reference.

Scott

Yeah.

Jonathan

Okay. So when he's on Omaha beach, Tom Hanks' character—

Scott

The opening scene, right?

Jonathan

Yeah. There's all that explosions and stuff - that's how it felt. That's the best way to describe it - that something's about to happen very bad.

Scott

Was that couple— did they have their backs to you or were they coming toward you?

Jonathan

They're just walking across the crosswalk, so they didn't have their backs to us. So, they would have been side by side. So when they would have looked to their right, they would have seen the car coming at them.

Scott

But they didn't even have a chance to get out of the way?

Jonathan

No, it was happening so fast and we were going so quickly. Like, at that time, when we hit them, I'm sure we're probably close to doing 50 miles per hour through the parking lot. I'm sure there's people getting out of the way and stuff. I just saw the people in front of me and tried to figure out how to wake him up so we could stop what was about to happen.

Scott

It seems like it's happening so fast that, even if he were to wake up, he would still be disoriented. "Wow, what's happening? What do I need to do?" By that time, the car would have traveled another 200 feet, probably.

Jonathan

Yeah. it was set in motion. What was going to happen was going to happen, and we were going to hit these two kids that were right in front of us. We made impact with the couple holding hands. Her head hit the windshield and it took her out at her hips, and I'll never forget her head when it hit the windshield. It didn't break the windshield, so it was just, if you would have thrown a baseball or a basketball at the windshield and it impacted, a perfect mark of her head, and it was right in front of me. So that's why I remember it so vividly. It just made this big crunch sound, bam. Then, I knew, right then, "Oh no. We just hit a kid." I didn't know at the time if the significant other got out of the way. I knew we had hit one person, for sure, and I remember the sound of her head hitting the windshield, impacting it, and then tumbling back over the car, just like, "Boom!" And we hit this couple. Okay, what, so what happens next? Well, he's still not waking up. He doesn't know what's really going on yet. I don't remember if he was coming to yet or not, but all I know is that we're still accelerating and we're still going through the parking lot.

Scott

And are there more kids in front of you?

Jonathan

Yeah, we proceeded through the parking lot and there were kids. I couldn't see anything after the windshield had been impacted. It didn't explode, but it's broken, so I can't really see what's going on in front of me now. We were accelerating and there were more kids. There were kids running around, I'm sure. And then, there's poles - I don't know how to describe it - like, parking poles down the side to the right of us. And then, to the left of us - you can take left's down lanes into the high school parking lot - that's where cars are. There were people standing in the parking lot just watching this all happen, watching us fly through the parking lot. Yeah, it had to have been surreal for them.

Scott

I'm sure a lot of people saw the actual hit when the car hit the couple. Were those students that you knew?

Jonathan

I did not know them. I met them after the fact, but I didn't know them before. I mean, we had a pretty big high school. I don't remember if they were younger or older than me. Unfortunately for them, they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. We were still accelerating through the parking lot. At this point, I was like, "I got to figure out how to stop this." Like we discussed, I didn't think about maybe grabbing the emergency brake or throwing it in park, so I grabbed the

wheel. I knew if we went hard left, we were going to hit other cars and probably other kids, and that distance seemed like the right choice for me. Right in front of us, there was the gym wall, so I grabbed the wheel and I remember I took it at an angle. I pulled the car to the left. At this point we're doing about probably 65 miles per hour. We're moving. We're hauling ass.

Scott

Was the gym made of brick?

Jonathan

Yeah, it was a solid brick wall, I grabbed the wheel. I just slightly turned it to the left because I didn't want to go head-on because I felt like, if we went completely head-on, we're going to both go through the windshield. So, I thought the best option was to put it at an angle and that angle would have been to my side - the passenger side. I turned it slightly to the left. I'm not a big religious person but I probably said a prayer at that moment and just, "Here we go, we're going to hit this solid brick wall going 60-65 miles an hour. I remember, I turned, we hit— I mean, my body— I don't know how I didn't go out the windshield, to be completely honest with you.

We hit it and I was very loose, I guess, and my right hand hit the passenger window. I just remember going forward - just a very big impact. I compare it to, like, the old crash dummy commercials, and they were showing you how you're safe in the car if you have a very crazy impact or something like that.

Scott

If you're wearing a seat belt...

Jonathan

Yeah. I was not wearing my seat belt. I unbuckled to reach over and grab the wheel.

Scott

Was Paul wearing one?

Jonathan

I believe he was, yes. So we impacted the wall. I mean, at that point, the windshield broke out. My hand actually broke out the passenger front window and on the front door because it flew over it. It's just a big impact, boom. I mean, I'm sure from the outside looking in, it just looked like a big explosion. The car had just blown up.

Scott

Yeah, and since you had already attracted so much attention by striking the pedestrians, by that time, probably everybody was looking at the car to see how's this going to end.

Jonathan

Yeah, everybody watched us hit the wall. I just remember feeling just in shock instantly, like, "What the hell just happened to me?" and thinking— I don't know. When you're in that big of a shock, I wasn't really thinking. My first instinct was like, "I got to get out of the car."

Scott

Did the airbags deploy?

Jonathan

Yeah, they deployed. I think that saved Paul from going through the windshield for sure, and it saved me as well. Even though I was up, I wasn't standing completely up, but I was up, maybe kind of, like, on my knees. So I remember that exploding out of the console and then hitting it and it launched me back into my seat.

Scott

How would you describe being hit by an airbag as it deploys? It, I mean, it can be a pretty violent thing.

Jonathan

Yeah. Airbag dust everywhere. Threw me back in my seat. I guess maybe it'd be like getting punched by a professional boxer or something, as a normal person. They come out so fast. I mean, it did its job. It threw me back into my seat. So that was good. Then, finally, I remember thinking, "Okay, finally we're stopped." I don't remember any pain or anything right away. I just remember being completely in shock and being like, "I got to get out of this car now." At that point, I was worried about myself. I don't know the extent of Paul's injuries or anything. I was just like, "I got to get out of here now. Get me out of this car."

Scott

And you also don't know if the other people were dead.

Jonathan

Yeah. I don't know. I just knew I needed to get out of the car and figure out what was going on and get help. I need help.

Scott

And the door was able to open?

Jonathan

The passenger front wheel had pushed up into my door. So, I remember I had the door open slightly, but I remember prying it, kicking it with my foot to get myself out of there. I had to put my foot up and I pushed it and I got it to where - I'm a skinnier kid - I could get out. I got out.

Scott

And was Paul still out?

Jonathan

At that point, yeah, he stayed in the car for a little bit. I don't know if he had woken up. I'd imagine that impact woke him up but, like I said, at that point, I was focused on myself. So, I got myself out of the vehicle. Then, at that point, I mean, I'm a pretty popular guy and everybody knows the car. I mean, you watch what your friends drive and stuff when you're in high school, so everybody knows, "Oh shit, that was Jonathan and Paul!" I could get myself out of the car and I remember I had friends just running straight to the car to help us. They didn't know what had happened. At that point, no one knows there's a can of air duster involved. Nobody knows that there was something shady going on with the driver. They just were thinking, "What happened?" Who knows what happened? They didn't know. They just want to help us and get us safe.

Scott

Yeah. The first instinct is "Who's hurt? Who can we help immediately?"

Jonathan

Yeah. So I was out of the car. Then, like I said, I remember a lot of people running up to us. At this point, I know what had happened inside the car. I had a friend who came up to me and he's like, "What the hell is going on?" And I was like, "Man, he was doing air duster." I remember the look on his face and he's like, "Are you kidding me?" I'm like, "No. And he passed out. We need to get that out of the vehicle." He's like, "Okay." So he, my buddy, physically got into the car and he found the air duster can. I remember watching him run over to the dumpster and he got it out of there, and he threw it away for us so that - I'm not thinking at the time - if cops start asking questions and stuff like that, I'm just trying to save his butt a little bit. I was thinking guilty by association too, so what's going to happen to me? I don't want anybody to know. I don't know how we're going to swing this when we get into the hospital and have to start talking to police and stuff like that but, for the moment being, let's just try to hide the cause of what happened at first, which is horrible. But it's just what I was thinking at the time.

Scott

I'm picturing people hearing this story and hearing that your thought was to get rid of the evidence. I mean, you realize yourself at this point that that was bad.

Jonathan

Yeah. That was the wrong move. I was just trying to protect my friend and my family. I mean, he's my family member, so I was just trying to protect him.

Scott

Obviously, somebody called the ambulance and the police. How soon before that they showed up?

Jonathan

We live in a small town - not super small but we know people - and the first police officer who was on the scene, he was my father's friend. So I remember seeing his face and felt more at ease. I know somebody. I know the police officer, he knows me. So he called me down, got me sat down, and then I was like, "Well, you got to call my mom. We got to call my parents and let them know right away. She needs to know. I need my parents with me." I don't remember if I gave him my cell phone - I don't know. I gave him my mom's number, but he called my mom. Then, all of a sudden, she's just there like an angel. She popped up out of nowhere and there's my mom. She's there to help.

Scott

That's what moms do.

Jonathan

Yeah, I guess it is. After talking with the police officer, then I started really realizing what had just happened, what was going on, and how bad it was. More cops were coming. Two, three, four ambulances were coming because we all went in our own ambulances. So here come four ambulances - sirens everywhere. Then, I remember seeing administrators and teachers from the school out there and just knowing what just happened - very bad deal.

Scott

Yeah, I would imagine there would be another scene over where the couple were.

Jonathan

Yeah, I remember looking up. Once the paramedics and stuff got there, they were working on them, getting them into the neck braces and stuff. They were mad at me because I had gotten out of the car during a major car accident. They don't want you to move your neck and your head and stuff in case you do have a bad back or neck injury. So, as soon as the paramedics are on the scene, they all have us laying down on stretchers and gurneys so they can make sure to get us secure and make sure that we don't have any major injuries.

Scott

So what were your injuries? Just your hand?

Jonathan

Yeah, I had a bunch of cuts and stuff on my hands, arms, and my face from just the glass. And then, I had broken my right hand.

Scott

How about Paul? How bad was he?

Jonathan

Paul had no injuries at all at this point. He has gotten himself out of the vehicle. There's people around and it's my mom's nephew. So she's up there. She actually put some blankets and stuff on him. He made his way towards the door of the school - I found this out later, but I don't know why - and he was just sitting there watching everything happen, waiting for the ambulance or to take him as well.

Scott

I'm thinking, as shocked as you were, when you guys went through and hit the wall and what just happened, he had to be completely confused when he woke up.

Jonathan

Yeah. He had no clue. He just woke up to complete chaos. I don't know exactly his words to the paramedics and people talking to him because, at this point, I was by myself with paramedics and they were getting me ready to go. I remember my mom asking me what happened and I was just like, "Oh, I don't know. He passed out." She was looking at me like, "What do you mean he passed out?" I was like, "I don't know. That's just what happened." So she was there. She was sitting there confused too. Well, did he have a medical condition or something that we didn't know about? I remember just a lot of confusion going on. "Why this happened? These are two young, healthy, teenagers, but there's just confusion on what happened? What just happened in the parking lot at lunch?"

Scott

I mean, you knew at that time, the primary concern was to get everyone taken care of, get to the hospital, make sure the injuries are taken care of, but you had to be thinking back your mind, "Okay. There's going to be more questions." Were you wondering how am I going to handle that?

Jonathan

Yeah, I was. I was 17, so I knew that my parents were going to have to be with me if I was talking to a police officer or something like that. I knew on the ride to the hospital. Everything

started to set in and my stomach started to turn, and I knew what was about to happen. It's not going to be good, especially for him. I know that he's screwed.

Scott

How badly injured were the two people that he ran into?

Jonathan

I didn't really know until we got to the hospital. The gentleman, I think he broke his leg. And she— luckily enough, she had a pretty bad concussion and stuff. I know they were in the ICU for— they weren't in there for a very long day or two but, luckily, they were okay. I mean, they didn't die. Thank God they didn't die. But I think that the thing was that they didn't see it coming, so they didn't tense up or anything. They were just loose. So it was just a shock of them just getting hit by a vehicle. So luckily, no one's dead.

At the point when we left this school, my mom and my dad were there, but I went in the ambulance by myself. I have a younger brother. So by this point, they have to go. He's hearing things too, so they got to get him taken care of. So I went to the hospital by myself. I just remember being really cold in this cold hospital emergency room, and I felt I was in there by myself forever. There was a police officer. He came in really abrasive and being mean. I felt like he just started grilling me right away. "What happened? What were you guys doing? What drugs? Where are the drugs?" All these questions. At this point, I did not say anything. I remember telling him, "You can wait for my mom and my dad to get here and then we can have a discussion." I wasn't going to say anything to him until my parents got there. I think it was right of him to ask an adult. I don't think it's right of him to come in there and ask a kid and start grilling him after— I just went through a really traumatic experience.

Scott

Did he know you were the passenger?

Jonathan

He never clarified on that. He just knew I was in the car, so he never clarified and came in. I might've been more open to talk to him if he came in and was very just, "Hey, I know you were in the vehicle and you're the passenger. Can you kind of tell us and enlighten us on what happened in there today?" It was more or less, he just wanted to start grilling me like I was a murder suspect or something." At that point, I was just trying to process in my own mind what happened.

Scott

And really, with the potential criminal aspect of this, you really shouldn't have spoken at all until you've got an attorney representing you.

Jonathan

Yeah. I thought that as well. Also, I was a minor, so I needed my parents to be there with me. Also, I'm a victim as well. I was not driving. I was not under the influence of anything because, obviously, they were taking our blood. I don't remember if they're making me do a breathalyzer or anything like that, but I remember them taking my blood, but the hospital is doing their things as well just so everybody knows what's in my system and stuff as well.

Scott

I just thought of this. I wanted to ask you, the police said that they saw the video of this. Why was there a video? Who took that?

Jonathan

The high school had surveillance cameras outside so that they could see, and I didn't realize there was a video of it until later down the road. So initially, when we're in the hospital - maybe they'd seen the video or not - later on, they said, "Yeah. We saw the video." And I got a little bit of praise for at least saving, I guess, some kids' lives by taking the wheel. So that's a good feeling,

Scott

So you're still in the ER and you have some family come in.

Jonathan

My parents showed up together and then I was thinking, "Oh man." My dad, he was a military guy. We had a very structured home life and he was very, very put together. This is what we got to do. So I remember being really scared to talk to my dad about what had happened just because, like I said, we're structured and he doesn't like when things go off script. He's very, "This is what we do." So I just remember looking at him and he just said, "Tell me what happened." At this point, I was telling him what happened and just kind of playing dumb. "I don't know, mom, dad. I don't know what happened. All of a sudden, he just passed out." The thing about me telling them that is that they know Paul. They kind of know his history. They know that he's maybe a little bit of an outcast, a little troublemaker, and lives on the edge a little bit. So there. I knew they're not buying it from me at that time but they were not going to press me any harder. They just wanted to make sure that I'm safe and that I get my injuries taken care of, and they're just happy I'm not dead.

Scott

There was some point in the ER where your uncle came in.

Jonathan

Yeah, my uncle— it was Paul's stepdad, but he was with Paul a lot throughout his life. We were very close - me and him. He came in and he's like, "Hey, what happened?" Because like I said, it's known that Paul lives on the edge a little bit, not afraid of things. So it's known they're not buying, "Hey. There was no drugs or alcohol." There was something involved. So my uncle was trying to get it out of me and I was laying there, and I was like, "I don't know. I don't know what happened. All of a sudden, I looked over and he passed out." My uncle was looking at me and he was just— I just remember his face like, "I know you're full of shit, man, but okay. I'll take your word for it, Jonathan." Thinking about it, I don't know why I was trying to protect him, but he was my best friend at the time and, I think, as a young kid, you don't want to see any of your friends get in trouble. I think I knew how bad it was going to be for him once they found out he was under the influence of something and it wasn't going to end up well for him.

Scott

Did the police specifically ask you about drugs or if there was one of the air cans in the car? Because obviously, they didn't find it in the car. It would have already been tossed.

Jonathan

Right. And no one ever said anything to me about it. They asked, "Were you guys drinking at lunch?"

“No, obviously no.”

“Were you guys smoking, like, marijuana or something?”

“No, we weren't.”

So we were in the ER and I was sitting in my room. Then, my uncle, probably about an hour later, he came back in and he looked at me and he went, “Well, Paul just gave himself up. So you can tell the truth now.” Then, I just felt, like, this sigh of relief, “Oh, okay. I can tell everybody really what happened.” I like to think of myself as an honest human being, even at 17. I mean, when you're a kid, you get scared and lie about dumb stuff. I mean, I was just raised and taught to just tell the truth. When you tell the truth, you have a better shot at— I don't know. It just works. It works out better for you.

Scott

You said you were immediately relieved now you can just be open about it. But as you said that, it occurred to me that it could be that your uncle was bluffing.

Jonathan

That just blew my mind. I've never thought of that before. I've never thought that before at all. Just the way he looked at me, I could kind of tell he was mad at me as well for just not telling him straight up. They're just like him. My dad— they're just honest, hardworking guys. So they just want to know the truth. What happened? They can't help you or help fix it if they don't know the truth right off the bat. Yeah, just by the look on his face.

Scott

You said that you later on talked to the two people that got hit. How did that happen?

Jonathan

It's kind of weird. There are three of us as victims. After Paul had told them what went on and everything, then, obviously, criminal charges were brought against him. He was being charged with a felony DUI. But anyway, we had to meet with the DA and everybody told their side of the story, kind of giving a victim impact statement to the DA. We didn't have to go into the courtroom. Thank goodness. I didn't have to go and look him in the eyes at court - that would have been horrible - but we all met with the DA and kind of told her my side of the story, and that's how I met them.

Scott

Did you have a chance to talk with them or you just heard what they said?

Jonathan

I heard what they said. I remember them being very nice to me actually. “This wasn't your fault. You're lucky you're alive as well.” Maybe they were just saying that to my face. I don't know what they would say behind me, behind closed doors.

Scott

But that's the truth. It wasn't your fault.

Jonathan

No. But when you're in a situation like that, I've felt a tremendous amount of guilt for her a long time after the fact. What could I have done differently to just stop the whole thing? There are a lot of whys and what could have I done, but it played hard on the psyche for sure into my mental health as a young kid.

Scott

Yeah, what was the effect? How did this affect you going forward?

Jonathan

It just changed everything. School changed. I remember walking into school. I went back to school. It happened during the middle of the week, so I went back to school Monday or Tuesday of the next week. Everybody was just looking at me like, "Whoa, that's the kid that was in the car. That's the kid doing drugs. This is the kid, blah, blah, blah." It was horrible. I was an athlete and a good kid. I wasn't, like, on a roll or anything. I did decent in school and I played sports but, after that, it just changed.

Scott

It was just all guilt by association.

Jonathan

And that, yeah. My mom told me a story. I asked her about it recently just because I was going to be on here talking to you, and she said she remembers being at the mall and buying me shoes. We were in, like, a shoe store or whatever and there were parents and kids whispering and pointing at me and stuff, and I don't remember that. I'm sure it was hard on them as well. We were well-known in the community too so, all the way around, it was bad for the family and bad for me.

Scott

What about your teachers? You said you were an athlete. Your coaches— did they kind of go along with the, "You're just a bad kid like Paul?"

Jonathan

Yeah, you'd think at a time like that, a coach or something would be the kind of role model that would take you aside and be like, "Okay, you're with me now. We're going to be in the gym or we're going to do this," but I remember walking into, like, weights and the weights coach was the football coach and he didn't even want me in his classroom. I remember some football coaches coached or taught classes that I was in. I actually withdrew from a class because he wouldn't give me a fair shot. I mean, they would probably deny that and say, "Oh no, he's just—" but I'm telling you, they did not want me around their teams, they did not want me around their players. Players couldn't be seen with me. Football guys and stuff— we could hang out outside of school but we couldn't be walking in the hallway together. They didn't want to see that. They didn't want to see their athletes hanging out with this druggie, alcoholic kid that they just thought was trouble. And I'd never been in any trouble before this at all. No trouble at all. Good kid, well well-mannered. I was never in any trouble. From just this one instance, it was like, "All right, that's it for him." It's crazy.

Scott

That's amazing. So you got this reputation and what you wrote when you messaged me once is that you said you played into that role. What does that mean?

Jonathan

Yeah. Well, sports was a big outlet for me to just go and blow off steam and stuff and I didn't have that anymore. I still had friends and stuff but I fell into more of the party scene and picked up smoking cigarettes and hanging out with maybe the not-so-desirable people. I said, "Well, they already think this is what I do, so I might as well do it anyway." You're left in school. I'm just going to party and hang out and do my own thing. I wish I would have fought. Looking back now, that wasn't the right choice,

Scott

That must've been so tough for your parents to see that because they know you're not really like that but, now, this incident steered you in the wrong direction.

Jonathan

Yeah, it threw me on a path that I never thought I'd be down. I think back, my football team won the state championship my senior year and - that's one thing that stands out to me is - I didn't get to play on that because I went down a dark path. I don't know if I started to self-medicate a little bit because it was hard on my psyche and hard on my brain to process all that. I had some PTSD things going on with it, I found out later on - nightmares and stuff like that. My parents— I was doing what I was doing, but they were always behind me 100% of the way - my parents and my brother - so I have to thank them for that.

Scott

What was the outcome with Paul?

Jonathan

He was convicted for a felony DUI. That was the charge he got. He pleaded out as some littler ones. So, he pleaded guilty to felony DUI. From there, he went on to prison. I think he was sentenced to 5-10 years in prison. I know he had some possibility of parole and stuff and we'll talk about that here in a minute, but he was 18 at the time that this happened. He was a year older than me. He had just turned 18. He turned 18 on October 28th and the accident happened on November 1st. In the eyes of the law, he's an adult.

Scott

18 years old and he goes to prison.

Jonathan

Yeah, yep.

Scott

And, he's not still in prison now, right? Do you know where he is today?

Jonathan

I'm not quite sure where he is today. We reconciled a couple of times after this. I remember the first time he was about to get out of prison, he started calling. I'm a forgiving person, so we talked. We never really had an in-depth conversation on what happened that day at the school. I think everybody's deserving of a second chance. So I knew he was getting out. I was in college. So, me and my little brother actually said, "Well, why don't you come over to the town that we're in?" So he came and hung out with us for a while and it didn't work well. He couch-surfed and stayed on our couch forever and then kind of faded off again.

Then, later on - we're in college - he faded away, came back again, tried to reconcile with him again. Once after my first daughter was born, he just could never get it together. I don't know if there's some mental things that happened to him that start with all this— burglaries and stuff like that. I didn't need my family around that, so we just lost touch and I haven't talked to him now in probably 10 years.

Scott

It's fascinating. You guys could be best friends in high school and then your lives take a whole— each of you go a different direction.

Jonathan

I always thought this too. He kind of got lucky in a sense. He didn't have to go back to school and face all the teachers and all the kids. Also, at this time, our family dynamic— it's a very close dynamic. So he's not the one sitting at Thanksgiving looking at his mom who probably— I don't know if she has some— cause we're not close now. It changed the whole family, so I don't know— but I'm sure they had some sort of, like, animosity towards me or some kind of, I don't want to say hate. I mean, hate is a strong word. Looking at me like, “Well, he's, sitting here. Why isn't—?” So, yeah, he didn't have to deal with everybody face-to-face like I did. I held, not as a grown man now— but I know, at the time for years, I held that against him because he didn't have to deal with everything that I had to.

Scott

But he was in prison. He was dealing with other stuff, right?

Jonathan

Yeah, he was. It was hard. It was just hard all the way around.

Scott

How old are your kids now?

Jonathan

I have a 1-year-old daughter and a 9-year-old daughter.

Scott

So your oldest one is 9. Have you told her this story?

Jonathan

I did. I just recently told her since I knew I was going to be telling it. She's a sweetheart and the sweetest thing. I told her the story, kind of told her what happened, and she went, “Daddy, how embarrassing.” I was kind of like, “What do you mean embarrassing?” She went, “Well, you had to go back to school and deal with all these people.” She didn't mean it like she was embarrassed. I don't know. She grasped the reality that it was probably pretty hard for me to go back and face people. So I thought it was funny that she told me that.

Scott

That's some insight for a 9-year-old. Eight years ago, you threw away all the newspaper clippings about that accident. What did it mean to you to do that?

Jonathan

Yeah, it was just like getting rid of— I was hanging on to it. The media didn't do a good job of covering the story. At the time, my name and stuff was in the paper. As far as my mom and my dad can remember, they never gave permission for people to print my name. I was underage at the time. I don't know if that's the fact. There was so much going on. Somebody could have called and asked my mom or dad, and maybe they just didn't communicate on that. So I don't want to put that out there that the newspaper people printed my name when they shouldn't have. I just needed to get rid of all that. There were pictures and stuff in there of the car, how crunched the car was. The day after, the front page of the paper was my mom standing with me as they had me up on the stretcher - that was the front page of the paper the next day. For me, it was just time to move on from all that. I have a new life, a little girl to raise, and I needed to move on from that. I needed to cut that tie, quit hanging on to it. You can't live in the past.

Scott

And I can see where doing something like that would be, kind of, mentally and physically just closing that chapter of your life and just looking forward.

Jonathan

Yeah. And I had to do that. I kind of always told myself, well, I wanted to show my kids one day what happened or something, but you know what? I don't really— I told my oldest daughter this story and I'll tell my youngest one day but, other than that, they don't need to see the pictures or what was written. I don't think they need to.

Scott

One last question. You've said that this accident changed how you look at the world. How is that?

Jonathan

I think it's crazy how fast an adult or a mentor will give up on kids very quickly. If somebody spent a little more time with me as a young person, I would have had a little better outlook on it. I don't trust very many people. I have a close inner circle - my wife, my mom and dad, and brother and stuff. I just couldn't believe how fast people are to give up on you. They didn't give me a second chance or anything. You would think a coach or something would have grabbed me and been like, "Hey, I know what you're going through. Let me mentor you a little bit. Let's keep you focused and keep your mind off of it." There was none of that. There was no, "Hey, we're here to help."

Let me take that back a little bit. I had a counselor in high school. She's the only reason I got through high school. I mean, there was a time there when I was getting ready to fail out. She did pull me aside and I was in her office quite a bit talking to her. I had a couple of teachers as well that helped tutor me and stuff and get me through high school. So there were people but not a lot, and no coaches and stuff when I thought that they had my back but they absolutely did not.

Scott

When you think of a coach, you think of pep talk, "Hey, this wasn't your fault. You can get through this. Let's get through it together." The counselor that you spoke of who really helped you, are you still in touch with her at all today?

Jonathan

I am not. I've talked to her a couple of times as I've gotten older. I actually looked her up before. I was going to do this because I wanted her to maybe hear it, so I kind of kept researching that, but I haven't talked to her in many years now. But man, she was great.

Scott

What occurred to me is that somebody like that, she would love to hear how she's the one - she's the reason you made it through high school.

Jonathan

Yeah, absolutely. And I'll continue to look for her and hopefully be able to give her a call and, when all this comes out and stuff, have her listen to it. Family-wise, she helped my family too and she was amazing through the whole thing.

Scott

And what's her first name?

Jonathan

Her first name is Nancy.

Scott

Nancy...

Jonathan

Yeah.

Scott

Good job, Nancy.

Jonathan

Yeah, she's an angel for sure.

Scott

Is there any part of this that we haven't talked about that you want to mention?

Jonathan

I do want to say, present day, I'm raising my kids and stuff and I'm sober. Just telling the story of everything I've gone through to this point. I live a sober lifestyle now and I'm proud of that. It took me a while to get there. I stopped in August of 23, but just wanted to throw that out there, and you can get through things. Drugs and alcohol don't help anything - they make things worse.

Scott

You can see pictures of Jonathan – from back in high school, as well as with his family today – in the episode notes at the website – WhatWasThatLike.com/169. And when you go there, tell me if you see any resemblance between Jonathan and a really well-known celebrity. I asked him, “Do people ever comment about that?” and he said, yeah, I get that all the time. Let me know if you see it too.

How to talk about “Question with Meredith” segment – or to include it at all

And guess what – Raw Audio 39 was just released. Hard to believe we've done 39 episodes in that series! These are bonus, exclusive content for supporters of the podcast. In this episode, a man has too much to drink at a wedding reception, and it does not end well for him –

Female 1

I have a very irate drunk guest. He has no shirt on. He's on the outside of the building. He's trying to beat people up. He's yelling.

Scott

Some Spring Breakers in Florida decide to try some hard drugs – and they ALL overdose –

Male 1

People are passing out.

911 Operator

How many people?

Male 1

Three people passed out.

911 Operator

Three people passed out?

Male 1

Yeah, because they drank a lot - like, a lot a lot.

Scott

And a Florida man goes into a tiger's enclosure, during feeding time –

911 Operator

Where is the male at? Is he still in the enclosure with the tiger?

Male 2

And yes, all 3 of those happened in Florida. You can binge all 39 Raw Audio episodes AND get the regular podcast episodes ad-free by signing up to support the show. And you can even try it out for free! On an iPhone, just go to the What Was That Like podcast and click on Try Free. If you use Android, just go to WhatWasThatLike.com/PLUS. You'll be joining the hundreds of other people who support the show. And I appreciate that!

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

This week's Listener Story is from an Ethiopian-American woman - Meklit Hadero. She is a singer and a podcast host. Her podcast is called Movement, and it's full of stories about global migration, told through music. If you enjoy listening to her storytelling as much as I did, you'll want to check out her podcast. You can find Movement with Meklit Hadero on the podcast app you're using right now, or at her website - meklitmusic.com.

Her Listener Story is about being stuck – in the Arctic.

Stay safe! See you soon.

(Listener story)

My name is Meklit Hadero, and I want to tell you about the time when I went from the equator to getting stuck just outside the Arctic Circle within the course of 24 hours. I was in a music residency in Kampala, Uganda, right around the equator. It was time to go home after a beautiful few weeks of spending time with musicians from all across the Nile Basin. It was part of a project that I co-founded years ago called the Nile Project. We were just finishing up teaching each other about each other's music, learning music, and co-arranging. It was glorious.

I got on the plane from Kampala, Uganda to Amsterdam. I was on this leg that is going from Amsterdam to Seattle, and then from Seattle to San Francisco, where I live. Just outside Amsterdam, around 45 minutes into the flight, I noticed something sort of funny. The wing— huh, it doesn't look right. I was sitting in a window seat because I always get a window seat. I was like, "What? No, the wing— gosh, that wing looks just like it looks when we're landing. That's interesting."

Moments later, the pilot got on the intercom and was all like, "Oh, ladies and gentlemen" - the way that pilots do - and he told us that the wing flap is stuck in the up position and I was like, "Okay, well, put it down." They cannot put it down. And surprise, this means that we are burning gas at about twice the rate that we are supposed to and we need to land, except that we are over the Atlantic or about to be over the Atlantic. This was the leg of the flight from Amsterdam to Seattle. So I was like, "But where in the world are we going to land?" They were just telling us, "We are doing our best to find a landing strip."

Now, these are not the words you want to hear from your pilot. The murmurs started rolling through the whole plane. You hear the whispers and some kid starts crying 10 rows back, and you feel the parents trying to hold in their own stress. And me? I was just like— I was dumbfounded. What is happening? So the flight attendants tried to reassure us that it's going to be okay. I was like, "Okay, you probably are reading off a script that says you're supposed to tell everybody that it's going to be okay, but guess what? We are over the Atlantic and we need to find a landing strip or we're going to go down."

Obviously, everybody's talking to each other at this point, like all social conventions are broken. You're talking to the people in the row in front of you. You're talking to the people in the rows behind you. You're just, like, desperately searching for bars on your phone. It took some hours before the pilots said, "We found a place to land." The relief is palpable, but where are we supposed to land? Well, the pilots found a landing strip in a place called Iqualiat, Canada, which is just outside the Arctic Circle. Yes. Remember that I had just been on the equator that morning. It was almost funny. But sort of, twisted, kind of funny, but they did.

They found a landing strip and the landing strip was built in World War II for Allied forces from North America, Canada, and the US to be able to stage flights to England. It is the closest airstrip in North America to Europe. Now, it is generally not in use anymore, but it is in good enough shape that we can land there. Okay. Hallelujah. We found a place.

So we started to descend and all I could see was white - the clouds are white. The water is reflecting the clouds and it's shimmering gray. We started to see brown. There were lots of brown rocks and gray rocks and not a single drop of green. There are no trees, there are no plants. In my mind, I'm thinking to myself, "Maybe there are lichens somewhere. Maybe there's green moss somewhere on these rocks. Other than that is billowing white snow, brown and gray rocks."

We landed and I am so relieved. The guy sitting next to me worked for a ski apparel company and he happened to have an extra ski hat that, much to my sheer delight, actually fit over my afro, which is not normal. Like, mostly if somebody says, "I have a hat for you," it ain't going to fit me, but this one somehow did. Also, to my delight, I had bought a pair of African print oven mitts that I had intended to give as a gift to my housemate at the time, and those were going to be my gloves. Remember, I just came from the very warm equator, so these gloves and this hat totally saved me.

We stayed on the tarmac for a good long while - a couple of hours - until they ferried us off eventually and we got into a school bus. Now, I don't know if any of you remember what it's like on a school bus, but these things are totally uninsulated. Maybe the heater reaches the school bus driver, but it does not reach you all the way in the back. Once again, thank God for those African print oven mitts and the ski hat from my neighbor. It was -50 degrees. They took us to a giant community center.

Now, at the community center, they've got air hockey tables everywhere and everybody just started playing air hockey. I mean, at that point, there was only one way to get the tension of the moment out, which was like, "When are we going to get out of here?" So it becomes this competitive air hockey tournament situation. Eventually, a couple of beers made their way into this group of people and we started kind of drinking and everybody's talking to each other because, once again, yeah, social conventions are totally out of the window.

I noticed that someone was looking at me and I turned around and saw this person who was very clearly an Ethiopian guy. I'm Ethiopian, he's Ethiopian. So we're like, "Hey." He's like, "Actually, I know you. You're Meklit." I was so surprised that somebody on this flight would recognize me. I mean, what in the world are the chances? It turned out, his name was Leelai Demoz. He's this amazing Oscar-nominated producer. He had this film at the time called Difret, which was making the rounds to all of the film festivals. It's this beautiful, powerful story. And turns out the film was going to be at Lincoln Center some months from then, and I ended up opening for his film at Lincoln Center - what are the chances? Got stuck in the Arctic and got a gig out of it.

We were there for about 8-10 more hours waiting for a plane to arrive from Atlanta. It finally does. We got back on. We went through security at this tiny little airport. Everywhere around, we saw these beautiful indigenous syllabary, carvings, and drawings, and it was just a small peek that we got into the community that actually lived in this place called Iqualiat in Canada, because after all, we'd only been at the community center. We got on the flight and made it to Seattle. A few hours after that, I was on my way back home to San Francisco.