

Annus horribilus: why 2017 need not be as shit as 2016

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And that, ladies and gentleman, is the year that was. If you weren't shedding tears over the weekly untimely celebrity death, or control of the world being wrestled back by bigoted megalomaniacs, or racist meat-puppets pre-emptively feasting on the corpse of the next generation's future – just maybe the smaller Toblerones provoked a wibble instead. 2016. The unprecedented and unmistakable annus horribilus of modern humanity. The unwelcome fart in the awkward but otherwise manageable lift ride that comprises this still young millennium. The Christmas dinner that neglects the pigs in blankets. The additional metaphor that stretches the premise of the opening paragraph just a bit too far.

Even in the absence of plagues, world war, genocide, meteors and any of the other real historical issues that have destroyed humanity and dinosaurs alike, 2016 will still stand out in modern history as a shitter that wasn't chucked in the bin anywhere near soon enough. Culturally, economically, politically, and – for a great deal of my nearest and dearest – personally, the last twelve months have done absolutely all they could to sap the positivity of a generation and leave us as hollow shells of the bright, enthusiastic sparks with the fire up their arse that left 2015 trailing in their wake. Fuck Brexit. Fuck Trump. Fuck ISIS. Fuck housing. Fuck jobs. Fuck losing our brightest and most inspiring celebrities. And fuck that person that broke your heart. Let 2016 finish its murderous reign with its own undignified death on December 31st. Embrace the shit that's been and make 2017 your humble little bitch-servant. This too shall pass.

No doubt I came into the year under a cloud. 2015, despite the usual ups and down, had been somewhat of a success for me. I learnt to drive. I began being truly honest with myself, taking responsibility for my mental health and wellbeing. I got a new job. I moved house. I achieved many of supposed essential adult milestones, and with not one shred of over-sentimentality sat down for my Christmas meal with nothing but positive vibes. Regrettably however, I had somewhat underestimated the alarmingly fragile foundations that was built upon. A breakdown of a romantic fling mere days later had me reeling. Suddenly there was nothing but self-doubt and intrinsic hatred. I was about to step into what proved to be the most challenging year of my life depleted of the necessary confidence and mental wellness I could definitely have bloody done with. Bollocks though it has been, 2016 has at least rid me of that faux sugary coating and better prepared me to tackle the years to come.

Whilst I consider myself a logical man, and absolutely agree with the idea that 2016 was, after all, just a collection of time and that there are no spiritual or cosmic shifts brought about by the clocking over of December into January, the sheer psychological strength born from the admittedly clichéd 'new year, new me' stuff is inherently valid. Sure, when I wake up on January 1st the world will still be full of irredeemable cunts, the socio-political landscape will still be a minefield especially designed to pick off the best and brightest, and that girl still may not bloody text me back, but the mere opportunity to consign the preceding twelve months to the depths of history is a psychological shot-in-the-arm beyond many of the finest shrinks. When you've been beaten down you need that outstretched hand to help you back up again. It shouldn't matter, but it does. Do yourself a favour and chuck any Facebook friend trying to piss on that idea with their snarky statuses over the new year period, of which there will be plenty.

So what do we have here? Well, I am not self-absorbed enough (not yet, anyway) to believe that only I have struggled this year. Indeed, for a generation of twenty-somethings coming to terms with the fact that the diamond-encrusted, unicorn-powered rainbow palaces we were promised as children aren't waiting for us at the end of a short road filled with degree-appropriate jobs and fulfilling relationships, depression and anxiety have become the words of the day. Having endured what is very likely the most harrowing, positivity-sapping twelve months in memory on top of that, it's no wonder we love a bloody good whinge. We simply weren't ready for the world to be so shitty and depressing, and 2016 took it upon itself to put that concept firmly in the limelight. As kids, our confidence was fed to be a hulking mass of entitlement and expectation, but as adults - abstract a term as that is to us - paranoia has gorged. We work shit jobs, we don't see our friends, we won't ever own a house, and romances will be fleeting and ultimately pointless. Feel free to nod along in polite agreement, kids.

Every generation has its social stigmas, of course, and on a smaller scale every individual will suffer with self-doubt at some stage in their life but there is just something, *something*, about *this* generation, at *this* very point in their lives that bellows problematic. Our over-pampered psyches hitting a roadblock of reality, perhaps? 2016 certainly provided that. For whatever reason, we've struggled to shake the entitled little brat moniker that was drummed into us, even with the best intentions, by fuck-ups of the Baby Boomers and the Generation X'ers. See? There I go again. It's everybody else's fault but mine. That's what my confidence tells me. Paranoia, however, stares a hole right through me and mumbles under his breath what an ungrateful little failed shit-stain I am. "It's just life, you massive penis, stop being so bad at it!"

See, there's a certain record-scratching moment that arrives at some point in every young adult's life, when the reality of just what we are doing on this planet begins to sink in, and any preconceived notions about what we 'deserve' start to dissipate. When that moment arrives, we fight or we flight. We crumble to pieces, or, we just get on with it. In a world where everybody is their own spin doctor, glossing up even the most tepid of life events in a nice shiny varnish of social media'd e-diarrhoea, it is easy to get lost in the idea that you sit, alone and unloved, in the void of the first category. Just you and your failed dreams.

Whilst in public I have I battled through with a Teflon-like resistance, behind the scenes everything that had upset me over the years - family, self-esteem issues, women, work - was amplified tenfold and given free reign to burn right through my psyche. Questions started to haunt me. Why had I fucked everything up? Why were none of my relationships working out? Why did I no longer feel close to my friends? Why can't I think of another one to pad out this paragraph?

A question can be the source of much enlightenment in the world, but when it rots and festers in the brain of somebody who feels like they've lost themselves, it can be destructive cunt-force of unimaginable devastation. When your life's plan doesn't come to fruition, when you suddenly start to wonder if you're indeed not the person you had built yourself up to be, where do you go from there? The feeling of emptiness was matched only by the feeling of failure. Whatever I had planned for myself, for my future, I had now reached the point where I was ready to give up on it all and succumb to unhappiness.

Until I didn't.

Don't get me wrong, I hate people that engage in uber-positivity as much as the next person – you know the sort, they can usually be found sharing Minion memes with some vapid, empty feel good quote attached – but there is definitely something to be said about informed positivity. Embrace the shit, don't ignore it, and use it to make your life better. If you've come here looking for advice for 2017, I guess this is it. 2016 was no doubt an awful, awful year for any number of reasons you care to conjure, and even with many things completely out of our control we can still muster the strength to make the little bubble we live in a little more homely.

I write this, now, as what I would even dare to consider a stable human being. At some point after years of tearing myself to shit-ribbons, I made a conscious decision to find my own way of re-evaluating and dealing with all the bullshit I had, honestly, laid at my *own* doorstep. Life became less about the bigger picture and more about whatever little wins I could muster. I let go of all the overgrown teenager schtick I was hanging on to for far too long. I removed myself from the self-imposed exile of the 'brave face' and started talking to friends and family about my issues. I spent time evaluating myself for who I really was, and not who I had expected myself to be. Over the last twelve months I have actually taken the time to get to figure out who I am, for the better, and like many recovery stories it involved hitting rock bottom first. Maybe someday I will be grateful to 2016 for that.

In truth, I'm not sure why I wrote this article, nor did I know where it would end up when I began typing. I guess, arrogance notwithstanding, I do consider myself to be quite wise and knowing what it is like to grow up without a voice or online presence truly depicting what's going on in the old noodle, I want to impart whatever dust fragments of acquired experience may prove useful to anybody reading. This year (or at least the tail end of it) I have focused on the friends and family that mattered to me most, and removed all the destructive personalities from my journey, including my own. I have failures as a human being. Lots of them. I'm miserable. I'm cynical. I'm lonely. I'm bitter. I'm unfulfilled. I am a lot of negative things. Having confidence is not in the denial of such characteristics, but in the owning of them. I *am* miserable. I *am* cynical. I *am* lonely. I *am* bitter. I *am* unfulfilled. So where do I go with that?

Well, I try (at least in a social setting) to enjoy it. I make jokes with friends about my failures with women. I'll have a laugh about failing to achieve my career aspirations. I'll pick fun about how I was in some of the darker moments in my life. At every opportunity, I'll play up to the cynical old man schtick and crack wise about the clichéd millennial poser aura I emit. I take the bile that has so often left me alone and in tears, and turn it into the laughter of myself and those around me. I exert confidence, even if it is born from paranoia. I take each little win, be it making a group of people laugh, helping a friend, or waking up one day and simply realising that that broken heart, that family argument, or that sense of overall human failure just isn't bothering me so much today.

Looking at the big picture is grand and all, but sometimes your therapy is in the most minute of windows, and right in front of your nose. I appreciate that may sound like one of those shit Minion memes I mentioned earlier – and for a cynical old shit like me it *is* difficult to reach such a level of *gag*

emotional human warmth – but there is a valid message there. This life is a shitter, and negativity probably *is* going to win the battle over positivity more often than not. That girl or boy probably will hurt you indescribably, that dream job may never ever come, you may never reconcile that toxic familial history, and you may very often be plagued by immovable self-loathing. Such is life. All you can do is attempt to nurture and grow your confidence wherever possible, and spin that vile paranoia into whatever positive form you can.

It isn't easy, of course, and don't believe for one second that just because I mustered the time and strength to write a few nice words that I now found myself immune from those horrible nights spent feeling alone, unloved, and useless, locked away feeling completely unworthy of social interaction. But in spite of all the shit 2016 has brought upon the world I remain, often defiantly, positive about the future. That is my strength. To face my shit and keep going. You can too. Love you family. Love your friends. Love you – because the world can't possibly beat you down any worse than you beat yourself down. 2017 may very well be just as depressingly awful as 2016, but you don't have to be.

I'll sign off with just one last point. The day before I compiled this article, the absolutely bloody fantastic Carrie Fisher passed away, the latest in a long line of overwhelmingly inspirational artists taken from us this year. Star Wars was the cultural phenomenon that defined my childhood. Princess Leia was undoubtedly the first badass female role model I ever had, and Carrie Fisher's strength against her struggles in real life was an indescribably important footnote in my adult life. A woman far more talented, articulate, humorous, and poignant than I could ever hope to be, Fisher's writings on mental health and self-love in adversity are priceless, essential reading.

I wrote at the time that her passing proved that 2016 had drained all positivity from the world, but that isn't necessarily true. I open social media right now to a swarm of this wonderful woman's writings, and a newfound understanding of the positive impact she had on the world. It is sad that only a death truly brings one's work to the forefront, but sadder would it be were these things to be forgotten completely. Carrie Fisher owned her problems, and would be delighted to see her message being spread so fervently, particularly at the end of such a challenging year.

Your problems, of course, are different. My problems are different. We suffer in different ways and in different intensities, but nobody's struggle is undeserving of recognition. Now go make 2017 your bitch, you hardcore badass.

May the force be with you.