

I hated school, my fondest memories are bunking off and smoking weed in the local fields. I have always struggled when it comes to concentrating with a pen and paper in hand.

So as soon as I hit sixteen, I dropped out. I could not get away quick enough.

I had no idea of what I wanted to go on and do, and I found myself working in jobs that I hated. I come from a fairly big family so growing up I used to wear hand me down clothes. Once I was earning money, I would spend the whole lot on either branded clothes or alcohol. So, my life consisted of doing something I hated on a daily basis, and in return, I was always pissed. But at least I looked good. Or I thought I did anyway.

I watched as my school friends went on to work towards college courses and apprenticeships. I felt an extreme frustration at the lack of direction in my life. I could never hold down a job for longer than three months. My attitude meant I was either fired, or I just stopped turning up.

My frustration quickly turned to anger. I began to hate everyone and everything around me. It was around this time I was introduced to the world of crime and gang violence.

I felt like I belonged, like I had some sort of purpose in my life.

Over a relatively short period of time I created a toxic environment for myself. I was being arrested on an almost weekly basis for all sorts of crimes, from arson and criminal damage to robberies and assaults.

Somehow, I kept getting away with things and so I kept spiraling out of control.

I submerged myself in the lifestyle, which meant I was always looking over my shoulder. Myself and my group of mates were involved in a postcode war, there was mindless violence on either side, often involving all sorts of weapons.

I carried a knife on me at all times, I used to say it was for protection, and partly it was, but it was also because I wanted to use it to stab people I hated. The thought of killing someone, or going to prison never even crossed my mind. I was just so engrossed in the lifestyle.

I would carry my knife like it was my keys, wallet or phone. I felt naked without it.

During this time, my self-esteem was at an all-time low. I felt worthless and so I was taking out my frustrations in the only way I knew how.

Unsurprisingly the inevitable happened and to cut a long story short, in two separate incidents I stabbed two people. Although they were seriously injured, fortunately no one died.

Detestava a escola. As minhas melhores memórias são quando faltava às aulas e ia fumar charros para o campo. Nunca fui capaz de me concentrar quando tinha um papel e uma caneta. E assim que fiz os 16 anos, abandonei a escola de imediato.

Não tinha ideia do que queria fazer e acabei sempre em trabalhos que detestava. Venho de uma família grande, por isso o que vestia, era sempre dado, em segunda mão. Quando comecei a ganhar dinheiro, gastava tudo em roupas de marca e álcool. Por isso a minha vida resumia-se, todos os dias, a: fazer qualquer coisa que detestava e andar sempre chateado. Mas ao menos, vestia bem. Ou pensava que sim.

À medida que fui vendo os colegas de escola seguirem para cursos superiores, outros para cursos profissionais, ficava cada vez frustrado com a minha falta de rumo. Não aguentava um emprego mais do que 3 meses e a minha atitude fazia com que fosse despedido ou simplesmente, deixava de aparecer.

Esta frustração rapidamente se tornou em raiva e comecei a odiar tudo e todos à minha volta. E foi por esta altura que entrei no mundo do crime e violência entre gangues. Sentia que tinha ganhado um espaço e um sentido para a minha vida.

Rapidamente criei um ambiente tóxico à minha volta. Era detido semana sim, semana não, por todo o tipo de crimes: fogo posto, vandalismo, roubos, agressões.

Embrenhei-me neste estilo de vida e, por isso, andava sempre a olhar por cima do ombro. (...) Trazia sempre comigo uma faca. Dizia que era para minha proteção, mas na verdade, também tinha vontade de magoar quem me chateasse. Matar alguém ou ir para a prisão eram coisas que não me passavam pela cabeça. A faca andava junto com as chaves, a carteira ou o telefone. Sem ela sentia-me despido.

Claro que o inevitável aconteceu: em 2 incidentes separados, acabei por esfaquear 2 pessoas. Apesar de terem ficado gravemente feridas, felizmente, ninguém morreu.

It took the police six months to get all the evidence they needed, I was charged and remanded to prison. After many court appearances at the age of only 18 I was sentenced to six and half years in a young offenders' institute.

Once I was sitting in my prison cell, and the door banged shut, reality hit. I was at rock bottom, I soon realised that everything that had seemed important in my life had now disappeared, and I was left feeling empty. To be honest, I think I got away lightly with my sentence, but it felt like an eternity.

I had to serve at least three years and three months. That was like a fifth of my life so far. I truly believed at that point that I would never achieve anything worthwhile with my life.

Sitting in my cell, sometimes for 23 hours a day, I was able to reflect on my life a little bit. There were no drugs, alcohol or any of my mates. So, in a way, I could think clearly. I realised that I could at least try to make something of my life. Starting in the education department. I was able to slowly change my attitude and my beliefs. That was the groundwork for what was to come.

Foram 5 meses de investigação e com as provas reunidas, fui condenado. Com várias presenças em tribunal desde os 18 anos, apanhei 6 anos e meio num centro de detenção juvenil.

Já na cela, quando a porta se fechou estrondosamente, foi quando o mundo desabou. Tinha batido no fundo e tudo o que antes parecia importante na minha vida tinha desaparecido. Senti-me vazio.

Para ser honesto, no início a minha pena pareceu leve, mas depois tornou-se uma eternidade.

Tinha de cumprir 3 anos e 3 meses. Isso era um quinto da minha vida. Nesse tempo, acreditei muitas vezes que nunca alcançaria nada.

Na cela, às vezes 23 horas por dia, deu para pensar na minha vida. Sem drogas, sem álcool, sem amigos. De certa forma, podia pensar com mais lucidez e percebi que tinha de fazer algo por mim. Através dos serviços educativos, comecei gradualmente a mudar a minha atitude e foi a raiz do futuro.

Discurso de Jon Watts, *chef* inglês, ex-recluso, apresentado na EPEA 17th International Training Conference (Dublin, 2019).

