

It's Not the What, It's the How

Ricky Silvestre

My theory is: sometimes it's only the "how" that changes, not the "what." So *how* will you approach the *what* that you are facing? I can only speak from my experiences, so read my past and understand my perspective.

Trying to be "That Dude"

Back in middle school, being "that dude" was an ambition I had. Being part of the "in crowd" meant skipping school, getting high, and going against any type of authority figure, including my parents. Keeping this goal of mine, I repeated seventh grade, and I ended up on probation for a CHINS (Child in Need of Services) petition my mother filed on me. In Massachusetts, a parent or guardian may file a CHINS petition on a child who is under 17, who runs away, does not follow the rules at home, or is generally out of control. In eighth grade, I was on probation for receiving a stolen motor vehicle and possession of marijuana with the intent to distribute in a school zone.

Still gripping my goal (I was 16 years old now and in the ninth grade), I was committed to DYS (Department of Youth Services) by the state of Massachusetts until my 18th birthday. If you are committed, DYS will decide where you will live until you turn 18 or 21. You will go to a residential or a locked program when you are first committed, but you may eventually live at home with rules set by DYS. Any violations of these rules will result in incarceration up to 90 days. This meant that if my social worker felt I violated the rules, it's straight to a locked facility I go.

On the Run

That summer, I was not looking forward to my third year as a freshman. I violated curfew, so I ran. Summer, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's passed. I was surrounded by many people, but I felt like I was all alone in the deepest and

coldest part of the ocean. My ambition to be "that dude" had back-fired.

Someone Believed in Me

While on the run I signed up for job corps and got accepted.

I decided to change my approach to life due to the constant pattern of failure and the years wasted with no accomplishments. I left a voice mail on my DYS worker's phone letting her know that I was done running and I was planning to change my life. Before I hung up, I provided the time and place of my departure to job corps. If she wanted to have me picked up, she'd know where to find me. She decided to let me be. I left to do job corps with no warrants. It felt so good to have been believed and treated like a young man. This feeling contributed to my new goal. My goal now was to obtain an education and put myself in a position to give back.

I obtained my business clerical degree from job corps nine months later. I wanted to familiarize myself with an office setting. My goal was to work with troubled youth— young people labeled "at risk." Because of my struggles and challenges, I felt I could relate to them and have an impact.

An Accident Changes My "What"

I was supposed to go back to job corps to take another shot at my GED, but unfortunately I got into a car accident. This was a major physical, emotional, and psychological blow. I'm now a tetraplegic— paralyzed from the chest down.



After the accident, I was in the hospital for a month, and then I was at Spaulding for 10 months. The doctors told me that I was paralyzed and that I would never be able to walk. But for about the first month, that information went in one ear and out the other. I thought I could just relax and take it easy. But then it hit me. It was all the “can’ts” that hit me—all the things I couldn’t do. I couldn’t participate in sports, drive, or tie my own sneakers. It was the little stuff that got to me. I needed assistance for my personal care. My independence was abruptly taken away. My social life came to a halt. A lot of my friends disappeared. All the little things that I took for granted—putting on my own earrings or being able to brush my own hair—all these “whats” in my life seemed to define my life. Not having them made me feel like my life wasn’t worth living.

I hated to see myself in the mirror. When I closed my eyes, I saw myself as tall, with a muscular build, chest out, broad shoulders. But when I opened my eyes and saw myself in the mirror, I saw a depressing sight—a physically and emotionally broken down “less-than” human being.

Looking for “How”

All these “whats” eliminated any type of “how.” I couldn’t see how I could keep living. It was impossible for any “how” to be a part of this “what.”

The new people in my life acknowledged me as the person I saw when I closed my eyes. These people were the clinicians, my neighbors, and my family. I even appreciated altercations with people because it made me realize that they were taking me seriously. They weren’t treating me like a three-year old.

My family affected me a lot. They were there for me; they backed me up emotionally. One thing they did was they didn’t help me all the time. They let me figure out how to take care of myself. Sometimes, “helping” isn’t really helping.

Once in a while, I’d have flirtatious moments, and the girl would flirt back, and that helped my self-esteem. Doing regular things—realizing that I could be helpful—shaved away a little bit of that

person in the mirror.

Still, I spent many years feeling self-pity and not doing anything productive. The same old feeling—the one I had at 17 while on the run—came back. I was wasting time with no accomplishments. I was thinking how different my life would be if I had gone to school or if I hadn’t gotten into the accident. But I couldn’t change the past, and I couldn’t change the fact that I was in a wheelchair. Those are the “whats” that I’m stuck with. I’ve learned, though, that I can change *how* I approach them.

That’s when I started going to GED classes. Now I am in college studying psychology. I plan to work with “at risk” kids someday. Everybody thinks how different their life would be if they had made some changes in their past, but I don’t dwell on that. I live for today to avoid looking back at my life and asking, “What if?”

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Making Sense of “Whats” and “Hows”

What does the author mean when he says, “It’s not the what, it’s the how?”

Describe some “whats” and “hows” in your life. Have you ever had a situation that you could not change, but you could change your approach to it?