

# Mud or Stars?

by Peter Sage

Often we forget how much choice  
we have in our perspective



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A Prisoners Story –  
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I couldn't believe it. I was still in shock. One minute I'm a free man walking into court and the next, I'm an inmate on my way to prison. Life sucks. I kept thinking of my family and friends. Obviously, I was hoping for a 'not guilty', but even when the jury found against me, I was shocked to get three years. Man, now what? It was though my whole life had just fallen apart. I felt a rush of emotions; from denial to regret, then anger and uncertainty, as the fear of the unknown and being inside hit me. This was my first ever time in prison. Little did I know that what happened next would have a big effect, not just on my sentence but on the rest of my life.

Still feeling numb, I arrived at the Jail and was given clothes, bedding and a medical. I answered the questions, and went into a waiting room with a dozen or so other prisoners waiting for a cell. There were two places to sit, one next to a big guy with a shaved head and a beard who appeared to be in his late 20's and one next to an older guy, who looked around 50 and fairly unfazed. As I thought where to go, someone came in and sat next to the guy with the shaved head, so I sat next to the older guy. I avoided eye contact but I could feel him look at me. Eventually he said, "Hi" and I replied, more with a mumble than a greeting. I was still numb and starting to feel sick.

He said, "first time inside?" I nodded. He said, "yeah, I can tell. My name is Dell."

I found out that Dell was on his third year of an eight-year sentence. He didn't tell me what for. It was also his third time inside. As we chatted, I started telling him about my case - how I felt it was unfair for a first offence and that the jury hadn't been told some key facts and why I was sure I shouldn't really be here. Before I could get into more detail, he cut me off. "Listen mate," he said. "You seem like a decent bloke so let me give you some advice." I wasn't sure what he was going to say but I thought any advice right now on

how to deal with this nightmare would be welcome. His first comment caught me off guard. "Let me tell you straight. No one gives a crap about your story. We all have one. Everyone you meet in here will tell you why they don't belong. I've heard it all. The truth is, 80% of people don't care about your problems and the other 20% are glad you have them. But the worst part is, thinking like that will eat you away inside." Before I could think about what he'd just said, he added "Can I ask you a question?" I nodded. He said, "Can you go back and change anything that has already happened?" I thought about it. It hurt, but he was right. I could spend my whole life, or at

least my sentence, complaining about what had happened but none of that would ever change a single thing. In fact, it would just make me more miserable.

“So what should I do, just lay down and do nothing?” I was still feeling anger at the system and wanted to at least show I wasn’t going to take it lying down. Dell sighed. “No mate, I’m not saying that. What I’m saying is the biggest mistake I see people make is the one you’re making now. They spend hours, days, sometimes longer, wasting energy thinking ‘if only it happened this way’ or ‘if only I’d done that instead’. What’s done is done. You can’t change the fact you spilt the

milk, you can only decide how to deal with the mess. And wasting time thinking 'coulda-woulda-shoulda' is a guaranteed way to stay miserable or full of piss and vinegar. And neither of those will do you any good in here." He paused. "Now, if there's a way to do something about what's happened, that's a different story. Whether it's an appeal or a way to change circumstances going forward or just learning from your mistakes, that's something you can look at. But the best place to look at it from, is with a clear head and you'll never get a clear head until you first accept what's already happened." He was right again. I was massively resisting my



situation even though in this moment I couldn't change a thing about it. I gave it a try and started to drop the inner resistance to where I was. It wasn't easy at first but when I started to get to grips with accepting my situation instead of fighting it, I instantly felt a bit calmer. Maybe there was something to what this guy was saying. I decided to ask a question of my own.

“Dell, what's the best way to cope with being in here?” He paused and thought. And then smiled, as if he was actually happy to use his experience to help. Something I'd learn the power of later. He looked as if he was remembering a time

long ago and then said, in almost a distant voice, "When I came in here the first time, I was just like you. Full of reasons why shouldn't be here. Angry at everything. The judge, the system, my lawyer, the people I hung around with. Even myself. I remember feeling righteous one minute and then scared and depressed the next. I didn't want to talk to anyone either, unless they wanted to hear why I was right about everyone else being wrong. It was only a short sentence, a few months, but it seemed to drag on for years. Man, it was tough."

"That sounds horrible." I said.

“It was, but do you know what? The main reason it was horrible wasn’t down to the system or even being in here. Give or take, the environment’s pretty constant for everyone. What made the difference was all down to how I used, or rather misused, my mind.” I looked confused and he obviously picked up on my reaction because he began to elaborate. “There’s an old saying. Two men sat behind prison bars, one saw mud, the other saw stars.” The condition is the same for both, but they chose to see it differently.”

I countered, “Isn’t that just positive thinking?”

“Positive thinking is one thing. Being smart and making better choices on how to think, so you can get through your sentence, is another.” Again, he made sense but I wanted to know specifics and pressed him for an example. “OK,” he said. “Let’s play a game. Let’s just say, I was able to offer you a deal to shave some time off your sentence and all you had to do was write a list – would you do it?”

“Sure, just tell me what to write.”

“Could you write a list of ten things that suck about your life?” This was too easy and I had a lot more than ten. “OK, but what if we play the same game but this time you have

to write a list of ten things you could be happy about in your life?”

“What now?” I laughed. I really wasn’t in the mood to play games and certainly not think about what was right in my life after the events of today, but Dell pushed.

“Yeah, right now. You asked for some advice on dealing with life inside and I’m giving it to you. So, let me ask you again. If it really was for a sentence reduction, could you write a list of ten things in your life you could be happy about or grateful for, if you thought hard enough?” I drew a blank and he prompted me, “What about the fact that you didn’t get a longer

sentence?” Good point. All this time I’d been focusing on why I hadn’t got a shorter sentence. It never occurred to me to be happy about the fact it wasn’t longer. Hmm, one saw mud, the other saw stars. I was starting to understand and came up with a few more reasons. For a start, I was reasonably healthy. Not in the best shape of my life but I could only imagine what it would be like to be inside and really ill.

Or have a leg or an arm in plaster or worse, be in a wheel chair. I suddenly had a lot of respect for people in that situation but at the same time felt grateful it wasn’t me. Plus, I had friends and family

on the outside. Not a lot, but at least they could send a message or visit. Suddenly, I didn't feel as bad but what Dell said next really woke me up and made me think. "My point is this. You can win both of those games. The question is, which one do you want to play?" His point was as simple as it was powerful. What's wrong is always available to focus on but at the same time, so is what's right. I couldn't see why this simple choice had not been as obvious as it was now. He added, "And you think it's only a game? Let me show you what happens when you play it from both sides. Let's say you come in here and focus on all the reasons why you can be miserable. Oh, you'll find them. But

then what? You walk around pissed off at the world, ready to react to prove your point that you're a victim of circumstance. Next thing you're either on medication for depression or you have privileges taken away or even your release date pushed back because you pushed back against another inmate. Or worse, an Officer."

I butted in, "But aren't all Officers like that?"

"Listen to me," he said. "I've been in this game a long time; the Officers are like a mirror. Smile at them and they're more likely to smile back. Get angry and upset and they'll do the same. Just like you or I would.



Besides, everyone knows the system ain't perfect. Show me one that is. Many of the staff and officers are just doing the best they can but some stuff is bound to fall through the cracks. When you're smart enough to see it for what it is, that the system is old rather than vindictive, you learn not to take it personally. Like toothache, it doesn't try to upset you on purpose. The big problem is you can't smile if you are playing the game of 'what's wrong with my life'. Plus, walking around with a chip on your shoulder trying to prove to the world you're right is a waste of time. Especially when, as I said before, nobody really gives a crap."

“You’re saying by just changing my mindset I can change my experience? It can’t be that simple.” I said.

“Oh, can’t it? Well, let’s play it from the other side. You walk around looking for reasons to be grateful and trust me, there are many. Take for example the soldier who had his leg blown off in Afghanistan but convinced the army to let him continue with a prosthetic leg. He was asked ‘but aren’t you now handicapped?’ and replied saying it was the enemy who was now handicapped as he had a bulletproof leg.” I thought wow, what a way to look at things. Dell carried on, “do you know how many

homeless people would love the bed you are getting tonight? Or how many refugees in Syria would give anything to be fed three times a day? Or the people just around the corner in the local hospital that would swap places with you in a heartbeat, just to get their health back or another few months of their life?" He'd made his point. He then added "Once you accept where you're at and try to have a good attitude, you can make more intelligent choices. The first one I'd make is decide to set yourself up to win." Again, I asked for an example. "There's an induction book in your cell, read it. It gives you the ins and outs on the basics of how things in here work. How to get visits, buy

canteen, get burn (tobacco) and more. Next, I suggest getting a job or education ASAP. It gets you out of the cell a lot more and makes the time go quicker. Focus on a goal. It could be anything. I suggest getting to the level of enhanced, as it makes things easier and it's a piece of piss if you keep your nose clean. Or choose a health goal, to get clean, fit or quit smoking. Or learn a new skill, anything that gets you looking forward, not back. It may sound strange but in here, boredom is optional."

I was making mental notes as fast as I could. This was good stuff. His next point was also bang on. "Next, be careful who you hang with. Even

on the outside but especially in here. It's a fact that if you hang around with ten drug users, you'll usually become the eleventh. If you hang around with ten people who are thinking of how they can make their life better, rather than blame everyone else, you'll usually become the eleventh. It's called the law of conformity." I knew he was right as there had been many studies that showed exactly that. He continued "Also, understand there's a difference between liberty and freedom. Liberty relates to movement and it's really the only thing they've restricted. But freedom is a state of mind and no one can take that away but you. The problem is those who see mud,

not stars, are prisoners of their own thinking whether they are in jail or not.”

“But why don’t more people think this way?” I asked. His reply was insightful and hit me like a brick.

“Because by blaming others, we get to feel like the innocent victim and feel justified about being hard done by. It may feel better temporarily but here’s the problem. It also means you give up all personal responsibility and then wonder why life continues to throw shit all over you. And, it also means you’re more likely to be back in here at some point. Screw that. You can’t change being in here mate, but you can

change who you are when you come out. In fact, the difference between looking at what you've learned instead of looking at what you've lost can be the difference between a life you can be proud of versus a life on the street. It's taken me three visits inside to learn that.”

Damn, I thought if ever there was a time I needed to hear that, it was now.

He then asked, “Do you have a partner?” I replied that I did. He said, “when they let you out your cell for tomorrow for social, ask an Insider to help you get their number added to your call list and then you'll be able to speak to

them.”

I said I was thankful for that but then he added something that I hadn't even thought of. “Go easy on the phone mate, don't just dump all your problems on them. Many people in here forget, but it can be just as tough for our loved ones on the outside. In fact, in many ways our spouses kind of serve the sentence with us.” I stopped and thought. I'd been so busy focusing on my own issues, it was a perspective I'd not even considered.

Before we could continue, a door opened and my name was called. I got up to leave and was told I was going to my cell which was going to



be on A-wing, on the top floor, something they call 'the fives'. I turned to Dell and said, "See, things are looking up already, looks like I get the Penthouse!" We both laughed, and he said, "That's the Spirit."

I went to my cell and found the induction book he spoke about, but before I read it I started making notes about all the things I could remember he'd said. When I finished I had a list of six key points.

1. Nobody cares about my story – 80% of people aren't interested in my problems and the other 20% are glad I have them.

2. I always get to choose what I focus on. Mud or Stars. After all, what's wrong is always available but so is what's right. Bulletproof Leg. Awesome.

3. Resisting what I can't change is stupid. Accept the fact the milk is spilt and then figure out how to deal with it. Look forward not back.

4. Life acts as a mirror. If I'm pissed off at the world, don't be surprised if it gets pissed off with me.

5. Prison may restrict my liberty but it can never take my freedom. After all, no one can ever do anything to me emotionally without my permission.

6. Set myself up to win. Learn the ropes, get busy, set a goal. Boredom is optional.

Within a couple of weeks, I'd settled into a routine, had a good job and had even quit smoking. A few weeks later, I made the enhanced level and life got better. Not only that, I was also helping other inmates make some simple shifts in their thinking using the six points above and many had seen similar results. That was probably the most rewarding part. It's called paying it forward.

I saw Dell a few more times after that as we sometimes passed in the hallways during what they called

‘Free-flow’. He always smiled and said the same thing – “Mud or Stars?” I’d always smile back and shout “Stars Bro!”

I often wonder what would have happened if I had not sat next to him and listened to his sage advice. I’m not sure if he ever understood the massive impact his words had on me that first night but it was something at the top of my list of things to be grateful for. I remember Steve Jobs once said, something to the effect that, ‘as the river of life unfolds we can never join the dots going forward, only looking back.’ It wasn’t until I came out that I realised what he meant and how much the whole

prison episode had shifted me in a positive way. Of course, given the choice, I wouldn't have decided to go in but I now know that complaining about what's happened is a waste of time. However, joining the dots, I know that who I chose to become whilst being inside is something no one can ever take away. It was then I finally realized the biggest lesson of all. That my environment never defines me. It simply gives me the opportunity to define myself. It also made me a better man, husband and father and to this day, I share those six points with my own kids. As a result, they're also making better choices in their lives. Choices that will not only keep

them on the outside but maybe, one day, allow them to pay it forward to someone else in need too.

The End.