

My name is Jason Bell and I am, amongst other things, a veteran. I was in the REME and served 5 years including a tour of Iraq with QRH/PWRR (Telic 8). When I left the army (or within the first year of leaving) I had my own house, a car and a £50k a year job. I lost all of it, largely due to how I dealt with problems that came my way. I am by no means an isolated case. Time and time again when I tell other ex-service personnel this, I hear the same tale echoed back. But nobody wants to be first to talk about it. Why? Well for me, and I suspect everybody else, the main reason was being completely embarrassed and ashamed that I couldn't just shake off my pain. You know something though, that shame- its bollocks.

I was trained to be a soldier first, everything else second and that's the issue. Outside the forces we are all human first and foremost, a fact often forgotten. Don't get me wrong, my ridiculous "hard case" attitude didn't start in the army. As a youngster I got bullied so in my early teens I shaved my head, got massive on the weights, toughened up playing rugby and swapped a smile for a snarl- and the bullying soon stopped after a couple of decent shows of aggression and physical strength. The result of this was my mam trying to get me into anger management from about 14. She failed and instead I started boxing, worked on the door from 17 onwards and then joined the army to try and straighten myself out as I knew I'd either end up in a cell or wooden box otherwise. Here, my misguided attitude was completely verified as I found myself surrounded by people like me, the attitude gaining strength as everybody else around me seemed to be getting on well enough this way. Add pride, honour and belonging to something bigger than myself into the mix and it's a completely understandable conclusion to come to. Based on this false sense of security, I started building everything about myself on this foundation, including my confidence as it was an environment in which I excelled. Turns out, that foundation was made of sand. Put too much pressure on it and it crumbles, as I and I daresay plenty of others can confirm 100%. Weak and strong is fiction, there is trained and untrained, that is all. People are essentially nothing more than the sum of their experiences as almost everything we do and are is learned from somewhere.

For many years I have slid further and further down in my own estimation because I based it on the principals that were cemented by the military environment. I'm not angry about it anymore because if I hadn't been trained to completely believe in this myth, then I, or someone else in my squadron, may not have come back from our tour alive. It was a necessary evil as my mind was fixed on violence and war. Unfortunately I didn't realise at the time just how accurate the saying "signing my life away" was when I did it. But I did and here I am. I'm not prepared to waste any more of my life on such pursuits though. I have no interest in laying blame anywhere but my own doorstep as it's been me who made every decision. No one forced me to sign, no one forced me to fight and nobody forced me to fuck things up. I just did it, largely without thinking too much about any of it, running on instinct. All I am interested in is why I did and what I can do to avoid making the same or similar mistakes. Certainly there have been people, events and other things that haven't helped my situation, but focusing on the things I can't change isn't going to achieve anything. It just makes me angry and nobody makes their best choices when their blood is up. The hard truth is, my biggest enemy for the past few years has been me- and *that* is something I *can* change. How? The same way I've been taught to fight any enemy- firstly by gathering intelligence on it, then using that intel to form a suitable plan of attack.

Not everything the army taught me was bad, now I must differentiate between what's going to help me and what's going to hurt me- and those I care about. I've been fighting all my life and I've no intention of stopping now- I just need to choose my weapons and targets better. When I was a kid and I got in the shit with my mates, if my mam was telling me off she'd say "If your mates jumped off a cliff, would you do it?" "No mam" would be my reply. But to be honest that's exactly what I've been doing by believing in the Grimm tale that a strong man can't acknowledge that he has feelings. As a civilian, first and foremost I am a human being and all human beings have feelings- that's the human part! I want to "be the best" (sound familiar?) and if I'm not striving to be the best human being I can be then what the fuck am I here for? I've been focusing completely on the masculine aspects of myself and completely neglected the feminine side I've heard about but resisted, probably due to my experience of life thus far. Masculine and feminine does not mean man and woman. The terms are more like left and right. If I want to get from A to B, I won't get far just turning in one direction, I need a combination of both in most cases. Even if I

eventually get where I want to go it's not going to be the quickest or easiest route. Life is a journey, so it follows then that I need both masculine and feminine traits to get the most from it.

Purely masculine men are made from iron, which is strong but has few uses. If you mix that iron with other elements (ie add a pinch of those more feminine traits) you get steel. Steel is stronger and has far more uses. Men of iron are great for war but not much else. Men of steel can sit like they were poured in most environments. I don't want to spend my life at war, with myself or anybody else, and as such I'm adding some other things into the mix. This doesn't mean I'm going to completely change who I am. I'm not going to start walking round cuddling people all the time or allow myself to be walked all over, there's still plenty of iron in there after all- my personality just has a little something extra to it. Since starting with this approach, I'm already seeing marked improvements in my life across the board. It hasn't been easy to look so hard in the mirror by any means, but struggling and fighting is where strength comes from. You can't have one without the other. Just like starting back in the gym after a good stretch of inactivity, the first few sessions are ninja- but it gets easier. My brain is just another muscle that needs training and up until fairly recently I didn't think about it like this, so I inadvertently let it get flabby. It hasn't got a six pack yet but it can pass a PFT now!

So, what kind of man do you want to be and what are you doing to achieve this? Beaten tracks are for beaten men, so I challenge you to carve your own path instead of following the crowd down the road to nowhere. Through working together, coupled with honest and frank sharing of our ideas and thoughts, we all become stronger. As such I welcome any feedback, positive or negative, and will discuss it with an open mind.

I'm in the process of writing a more detailed account of my take on these topics as well as a bit about who I am, some of what I've done in my life, both good and bad, where I think I've gone wrong and where I think I've gone right, in the context of what's made my life better or worse. The point of this is to try and understand myself better because if I don't understand myself how can I understand where I fit in the world? I'll also be posting what I'm doing to change my lifestyle and more importantly the reasons behind me making those changes. I find that if I understand why I have to do something then it's a lot easier to motivate myself to do it. You'll find it on liverpoolveterans.co.uk, in the creative veterans section of the website, my profile name is Hard Way Jay and I'll be posting the link on my Facebook when it's done, so feel free to add me (search hard way jay). If you're interested, any of what I've said sounds familiar or you want to see how I'm going about re-modelling myself and taking back control of my life then go online and take a look, or speak to me, either in person or on Facebook.

For now I'd like to draw your attention to one aspect that has been integral to getting me this far and has already given my mind some degree of peace - creative expression (art, music, writing etc) and understanding the point of it. I wrote the piece below after 2 months of my re-introduction to creativity at FACT, and although I now have more information to add (and will in the not-too-distant-future posts) I think it is enough to illustrate my point here. I am so passionate about this subject because I thought it was a load of my arse when I first started, but after trying it and learning a little about why it works, I've had my eye well and truly wiped. Art in particular is not *just* what I thought it was. Don't get me wrong there's still plenty of it that's a load of pretentious shite but the stuff I've had a go at is something else entirely. It's exciting, thought provoking and captivates my imagination completely. When I started, for the first time in ages, I found myself looking forward to something- the sessions on a Wednesday. Even if you don't fancy coming along to FACT, I'd whole heartedly recommend pursuing some form of creativity yourself, you've nothing to lose and more than you know to gain- it's certainly been the case for me.

The following is in the context of art but the same principals apply to other creative pursuits and it was entitled "What's the Point?"

During our time in the Forces all of us have been conditioned to think very directly and follow orders to the letter. This is necessary for turning men into the best soldiers but to these extremes, is not ideal for civilian life to say the least. Uniform bed spaces, drill and razor sharp creases are examples of this

behavioural conditioning. They aren't there just to make us tidy and look smart on parade, although these are useful side effects. In a similar fashion, art can be used to offer our minds different avenues to go down.

The manner of thinking necessary for civilian life is very different to what we are used to, where things are very rarely as straight forward as they are in the Forces. Everything about our day has been organised from getting up to where we sleep. The subtle differences in behaviour that every former soldier sees between us and civilians are there because of our conditioning. Many of them set us apart in a good way. But those same differences can lead to a real shock to the system when we get dropped back into civilian life and their impact can take many years to show through.

Our bodies get out of shape when we don't train, so too do our minds. Art isn't about painting pretty pictures it's about creative thinking and it enables us to see the world from a different perspective. Our thoughts have been shaped to be functional, but much of our new environment, and many of it's people are not. Civilian life is full of little battles and obstacles that simply don't exist in military life. The army streamlines our thought process because it is optimising us for war. As the rules of engagement are different for war and peacekeeping, so too are the 'rules' for army and civilian life.

When we leave our last post, if we don't adjust to encompass these changes, we find it difficult to overcome the transition from one to the other. The worst of it is that many of us don't notice that we are acting under the effects of this conditioning. More often than not it takes something major to happen before we look closer at what has led us to this point. Does it not make sense to nip these potentially crippling issues in the bud?

Even if we are lucky enough to avoid any major dramas and get along fine, we can still miss out on so much the civilian world has to offer. Why? Because we can't see its there.

Don't we, who risk more than most for our country, deserve to get the most out of our civilian life too?

NB. If you don't know something and ask a question, you might look stupid for a minute. If you don't ask the question, you stay stupid.... Which would you rather?