

ATSUSHI: JAPAN

My name is Atsushi. I am a 29 year old Japanese man.

I was detained in a young offenders' institution (approved school) at the age of 16.

I will start with the story before my detention.

I was brought up in a rather wealthy family. I had both parents and grandparents and I also had an older sister.

We were not a poor family and had enough money at home.

However, I had been shoplifting and stealing money from my parents.

I was bored and not satisfied with my life.

At around 11 years old, I started to dislike the maths class.

I had attended and worked hard at the maths class until that time.

However, I started not paying attention to the class when the class became too difficult for me.

Then inevitably, I was not able to follow classes after I went to junior high school.

I gradually got to hanging out with friends who did not want to study.

At the beginning, my mother scolded me and the teachers reprimanded me.

Still, I did not want to go back to being an ordinary pupil.

I wanted to stand out.

I was not good enough to stand out academically.

I was not good at any sports either.

I did not know what to do.

Then, I thought that it could be a good idea to be a member of a teenage gang, which might attract attention.

I gradually turned into a delinquent.

I did not go to school but played with friends in the town.

I also quit the junior baseball team I was learning to play with.

At the age of 14, I began committing violence and extortion, and started using drugs.

I stopped going to school.

For me, the company of these idle friends and playing with them were more enjoyable than going to school.

My life had started coming off the ordinary course.

But, my thought was: "It is fun right now, but if I continue living in this way, where does my life end up?"

I felt insecure and anxious.

After graduating from junior high school, I was admitted to high school.

However, I dropped out from high school after three months.

Then, I joined a group of biker gangs.

It was because I felt insecure without belonging to something.

I did not like loneliness.

With the biker gangs, I repeatedly mobbed and robbed people.

For operating as a biker gang, we had to pay "protection money" to Yakuza [Japanese mafia] every month.

I robbed people for the necessary money using violence.

I used violence towards many people.

I even started to feel pleasure by hitting people.

I had lost the normal feeling.

I was arrested by police at the age of 16.

It was on extortion charges.

I was detained and sent to a young offenders' institution.

Now, I will write about the life at the young offenders' institution (approved school).

The young offenders' institution to which I was sent had neither outer walls nor iron bars on the windows.

It had an open atmosphere like Scandinavian prisons.

Young offenders' institutions in Japan normally have tall outer walls, locked rooms, and surveillance cameras.

However, the place where I was detained did not have them.

It was a very comfortable environment.

The instructors were all good people.

I realised that there were also such good adults.

However, I could not accept the reality at the beginning; therefore I was not able to conduct my life decently.

One day, I was given the following words by an instructor:

“You cannot change your personality easily, but you can change your behaviour.”

Only slightly yet, but I was changed from the next day.

Then, I did my best.

When I was given a role, I worked hard.

I enjoyed being praised by the instructors.

At the approved school, I regretted my past acts for the first time in my life.

I thought that I wanted to change my life for the first time.

And I set an objective at the approved school.

I decided to go to high school once again.

I spent five months at the approved school.

Soon after leaving the approved school, I left the group of biker gangs at once.

Usually when a gang member leaves the group, he will be forced to pay a large sum of money, and get beaten up.

But I was lucky. They did not demand anything.

After leaving the approved school, I kept a distance from my old friends.

This was because I was concerned that I might commit a crime again if I hung around with the old friends again.

However, I became lonely.

I had a family, but it was painful that I did not have any friends.

Nevertheless, I had hopes.

I believed that I would make friends when I went to high school.

I enrolled in high school.

However, I was often truanting from school.

This was because I became lonely again.

I had no friends at school.

It was because I felt those pupils were a different kind of people to me.

I was a delinquent boy, and there were always delinquent companions around me.

But, the people who were in the classroom were decent and ordinary pupils.

I was not able to talk with them.

I built walls around me.

I was always alone in the classroom.

Then I dropped out of high school again.

I was lonely.

I was not changed from the old days.

However, I knew that the current situation was not good for me.

Then, I came across many good people one after the other.

They were slightly older than me and I felt they were like my older brothers.

They invested a lot of their time on me.

They spent a lot of time playing with me.

They gave me a lot of knowledge.

Even when I betrayed them many times, they did not abandon me.

They gave me a lot of affection.

With those acquaintances, I was able to find hope in the future.

I became able to envisage a good image for my future.

I hoped to become a man like them in the future.

I thought I could never play the villain again.

I strongly believed that I wanted to live as an ordinary man.

I firmly made up my mind to graduate from high school by all means.

I was admitted to high school once again. It was when I was 19 years old.

This time, I was able to do my best.

I went to school every day without being late.

I was also able to make good friends.

I spent a lot of time with good classmates.

I really enjoyed every day.

I became strongly aware that:

If you could change yourself, the people around you would also change.

Things would change hugely depending upon yourself.

Your life would be determined by yourself.

I really changed.

I have done the tenth grade four times in my life.

And I graduated from high school at the age of 22.

I had a dream to become a school teacher.

It was because I wanted to tell young people that "you can change your future."

I was admitted to university.

I studied a lot; ten hours or more every day.

Life like this continued for two years.

I was awarded a teaching licence by the university.

And now I work at a small private school.

There are children with many problems coming to this school.

I am working eagerly for those children.

In May 2009, I joined a group called "The Second Chance" in Japan.

It is a mutual self-help group among graduates of approved schools.

"The Second Chance" is modelled after the mutual self-help group "KRIS" for ex-inmates of prisons in Sweden.

"The Second Chance" has currently 100 members.

Our objective is to prevent youth crime.

Our activities include giving lectures at the young offenders institutions and schools, and playing with youths.

We get together regularly and have many meetings.

I did not have any typical circumstances and conditions for becoming involved in crime.

I have a family with love. I also had friends. My family was not poor.

I was a criminal with luxurious circumstances.

But I received a lot of love from strangers. Really a lot.

Now, I would like to return a favour to society.

I would like to use the best out of my negative experiences and strongly desire to help young people.

And I would like to spend the rest of my life in that way so that I can say at the end of my life that it was a positive life.

I cannot change my past, but I strongly believe that I can change my future.

I would like to live earnestly from now on.

Thanks

Atsushi