

Disappointment in Federal Prison

By Michael Santos

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When we're living in challenging times, stories have the potential to give us strength. Those who've read *Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Sentence* know that a story changed my life. I was locked in a solitary cell when I found the story of Socrates.

The first time I read about Socrates, I learned of his mindset while he awaited his execution. Like me, he was inside a solitary cell. For that reason, I felt more receptive to receiving his message.

Although my story isn't like the story of Socrates, since I served multiple decades in prison, I hope readers of this email will be receptive to this message I offer. I hope readers will know that I empathize with every person in prison and that I work with one goal: To help people work through the pains of incarceration and prepare for a better life.

The message of the story: While in prison (and in life), we must anticipate disappointment and work to succeed anyway.

This story began in 2005. By then, I had served 18 years of my sentence. I'd been in a US Penitentiary system, two FCI medium-security prisons, one FCI low-security prison, and two minimum-security camps, Florence and Lompoc.

I had eight years remaining to serve.

When authorities transferred me from the low-security prison in Fort Dix to the minimum-security camp in Florence, I felt a massive stress level come off me. Many people in higher-security prisons look forward to serving time in camps. Since I'd gone from high-security to medium-security to low-security, I had a different perspective than most people in the camp.

Each time authorities transferred me to a lower security level, I felt waves of stress come off.



Since I'd never been in prison before the instant offense, when authorities sent me to a USP, I didn't know any difference in security levels. Like every person reading this letter, I felt the pain of being separated from family. Regardless of where a person serves a sentence, a person feels pain and disappointment while in confinement.

Yet when I got to the medium-security prison, I appreciated the higher level of liberty. After many years, I went to a low-security prison. That felt even better. When I moved within ten years of my release date, the authorities sent me to the camp in Florence.

After St. Martin's Press published my book *Inside*, newspapers began to publish reviews of the book. Staff members responded by locking me in handcuffs, sending me to the hole, and transferring me to another prison. That's how I went to the camp in Lompoc.

While in Lompoc, I continued writing for publication. After 18 months, authorities at Lompoc Camp locked me in segregation again. The captain of the prison came to see me. The experience disrupted my life. Ironically, it opened career opportunities later.

Logically, I would have thought that administrators would support my efforts. By writing, I stayed away from problems. Simultaneously, I developed skills that would allow me to transition into society.

From the view of staff members, however, by writing for publication, I brought unwanted attention to the Bureau of Prisons. They made me pay the price, sending me to the hole or transferring me to prisons in other parts of the country. Over the course of the 9,500 days that I served, I spent time in prisons located in the following states: Florida / Georgia / Oklahoma / Arizona / Washington / Alabama / Pennsylvania / New Jersey / Colorado / California.

Each time authorities transferred me, I felt disappointed. Over time, I learned to build grit.

How?

Leaders who built great companies, or leaders who overcame enormous struggles, taught many lessons. From them, I learned that regardless of what administrators did, I would have to stay on my journey and prepare for success. Disappointment, I learned, would become a part of the prison experience. Despite the decisions that others make, we must persevere. We must continue pushing forward to become the success that we want to build.

People who are in prison will face many challenges ahead. By the time this message comes to them, they will already be familiar with disappointment. Some possible examples:

- » Authorities chose to bring a criminal charge when a civil case may have been more appropriate.
- » Attorneys did not deliver what they promised.
- » Prosecutors may lie or misrepresent facts to get a conviction.
- » The sentence may not be fair.
- » Prison administrators may not do what they should.
- » Family and friends may disappoint.

These are the pains of confinement. They cause disappointment. But leaders know that they must fight, always striving for something better.

I am writing this email because of some research I was doing in preparation for an interview I have scheduled for this coming week. It's with a former member of the BOP's executive staff. In preparing for that interview, I read through the Federal Register. I tried to understand discrepancies between the intent of Congress and the activities of the BOP.

I came across a complaint from a US Representative. He complained to the BOP about the agency using a bad-faith effort to circumvent the will of Congress with the First Step Act. A favorable result ensued, with the BOP changing a policy that would benefit each person in federal prison. Initially, the BOP wanted to require a person to remain in a program for eight hours before it would issue Earned Time Credits. But because of good advocacy, the agency agreed to change its policy. Now, people receive earned time credits for the programs they complete, not for the number of hours that pass.

This example goes back to what I wrote many times before: we must expect disappointment. We must advocate, knowing the importance of perseverance.

During the 26 years that I served, I went through several extensive reform periods. The First Step Act is the most significant prison-reform legislation since 1987. As with all reform periods, the BOP would iterate policies over the years. It always causes disappointment. But a person must always work toward bending the arch of justice and working toward a better outcome.

If people do not advocate for themselves, they can count on serving the entire sentence. The BOP is an agency that operates like any other bureaucracy. It seeks to grow. Yet the First Step Act provides mechanisms people can use to open the door.

Don't give up hope. Always be stronger than the decisions than the decisions that others make.

People must work to advocate for themselves at every stage, understanding the opportunity costs that accompany every decision.

It's a lesson that I learned from leaders like Socrates. It's a lesson that readers of this email likely practiced before the government targeted them for prosecution. It's a lesson that every person in prison would be wise to practice now. Regardless of what disappointment comes, persevere. Work toward success.

I am very optimistic that when the new director gets her arms around the agency, we'll see a positive implementation of the First Step Act. Yet I would also expect to feel many disappointments along the way.

I will do my best to gather the information that members of our community can use. And I will always work hard to prove worthy of your trust.

One thing I can tell everybody: I always kept hope. The First Step Act didn't exist when I served my sentence, which was one reason why I had to serve many years. People now have a mechanism to work toward a better outcome. But it's work. And there is no guarantee of anything. Administrators may deny requests for administrative remedy. The person must go on. The person must always work toward something better, regardless of what the agency does, or what disappointments come.

Earlier in this letter, I wrote about a captain locking me in the hole for writing books when I was in Lompoc. That captain later became a warden, and then a member of the BOP's executive staff in Washington. After my release, we connected again. He opened opportunities that helped me to build a digital-product business that I've since turned into a nonprofit, hoping to make a bigger impact on the world.

I'm passionate about working toward prison reform, and toward helping people in prison get the best possible outcome. I hope that every recipient of this letter will join this effort, and stay focused, always working through the challenges and disappointments that come.

Sincerely,
Michael Santos



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