

# Happy Thanksgiving, 2022



Dear Members of our Community,

It can be hard to live in gratitude when we're in prison. During the 26 Thanksgiving holidays I spent in federal prison, I learned how to shrug off the negative and build strength by embracing the positive.

While sending Happy Thanksgiving wishes to all members of our community, I want to reveal how living in gratitude helped me—with the hopes that the same strategy can help each of you make it through this holiday season.

I spent my first Thanksgiving in solitary confinement in a city jail back in 1987. I was 23 and didn't know what would transpire. The charges exposed me to the possibility of a life sentence. Clinging to delusions of liberty, I convinced myself that a jury wouldn't convict me. Instead of thinking about the best possible outcome, I lived in fantasy, hoping the troubles that followed from my past decisions would vanish.

They didn't.

I spent the second Thanksgiving at USP Atlanta. By then, I had lost in a trial and started moving deeper into a 45-year sentence. By then, I had learned about "good time" and understood that I could finish my sentence in 26 years. It was hard to put that time in perspective, because I hadn't been alive that long.

Philosophers inspired me. They taught me to stop thinking about my problems and think about solutions I could create.

Like every other person, I hated being in prison. My girl decided to leave and go her own way. I didn't know what awaited me.

Strength came from reading about others who had gone through tough times—but emerged stronger. I used to spend time in the library reading about people who suffered. I came across the story of Mandela. Authorities locked Nelson Mandela in prison in 1964—the year that I was born. Despite the quarter-century he had already served, stories I read described how he lived productively, always in the service of others.

I found hope and inspiration when I read about how he served his sentence. He helped me believe that even though I would have to serve decades in prison, I could choose to create meaning out of the journey.

In many ways, reading about Mandela and others helped me to feel thankful. They gave me both hope and direction. They helped me realize that even though I missed my family and the life I knew before prison, I could start rebuilding. The pathway would require me to take a series of steps:

- » I had to visualize the best possible outcome as being something I could control rather than something the system would control.
- » I had to think about the people I wanted to meet and influence in the future and the impact I wanted to have on society.
- » I had to engineer a pathway that would help me work toward little micro steps that would lead me closer to the person I wanted to become.
- » I had to put priorities in place, figure out what I would have to do first, and anticipate how the tiny accomplishments would open new opportunities.
- » I had to create a playbook that would work for me and aligned with success, as I defined it, regardless of what other people suggested that I should do.

Once that plan became clear, I could start taking those micro steps. Each of those tiny steps empowered me—because, despite external factors, I could always work on myself. And I had a great deal of work to complete in personal development.

With a plan, I no longer felt as though I was only waiting for days to turn into weeks, weeks to turn into months, or months to turn into years. Instead, I could live in gratitude, knowing that each day I could work on myself. I knew I would carve out a new future by working to become better.

I remember seeing a picture that inspired me. An artist carved a statue known as the Self-Made Man. The base of the statue is a simple block of marble. Emerging from the base, we see the torso of a man who holds a hammer in one hand and a chisel in the other. The hammer looks as if it's about to strike the chisel to mold the block of marble into the man he wants to become.

Seeing a photograph of that statue gave me hope. And I felt grateful because it helped me believe that regardless of what bad decisions I made in the past, I could build something new.

No one knows how hard I worked through that journey.

Thanks to leaders like Mandela, Malcolm X, Viktor Frankl, Mahatma Gandhi, and so many others, I learned more about resilience. Those people inspired me to accept every day in prison as a gift. Even though I wasn't where I wanted to be, I could work on becoming the man I wanted to become.

In November of 2012, I spent my last Thanksgiving as federal prisoner 16377-004. I was in the San Francisco Halfway house. That was ten years ago. Because leaders inspired me, opportunities opened. They helped me emerge differently from what the system or what others expected. The adjustment led newspapers to cover my return to society. That media coverage opened opportunities to build a career.

People wanted to know what it was like to return to society after a quarter century. The seeds I started to plant at the start of my journey made me feel productive. They allowed me to educate myself, build a body of work, and nurture a relationship with the love of my life—Carole—a woman who married inside of a prison visiting room during my 16<sup>th</sup> year.

For all those blessings, I could live in gratitude.

Now, I have a duty and a responsibility. The duty requires me to repay those leaders by working to share with others the lessons that they taught me. The responsibility requires that I work to improve outcomes for all justice-impacted people.

I consider it a privilege to do this work. And I am thankful that every day I served in prison put me in a position to do the work I'm doing now.

My wish for every member of our community is that they, too, find hope in learning from leaders. Sometimes, while living in prison, we need reminders of that hope—particularly during the holiday season.

Try to live in gratitude. People out here care about you. We're working, taking micro steps, to improve the outcomes of this system. We know the challenges that influence the lives of so many, and we're executing our daily plan to influence improvements.

As Mandela taught me, it's a long walk to freedom. We will never ask anyone to do anything that we didn't do. And we will continue our efforts to make things better.

With hopes for your happy Thanksgiving, I thank you for allowing our family at Prison Professors to be a part of your life.

Sincerely,  
Michael Santos