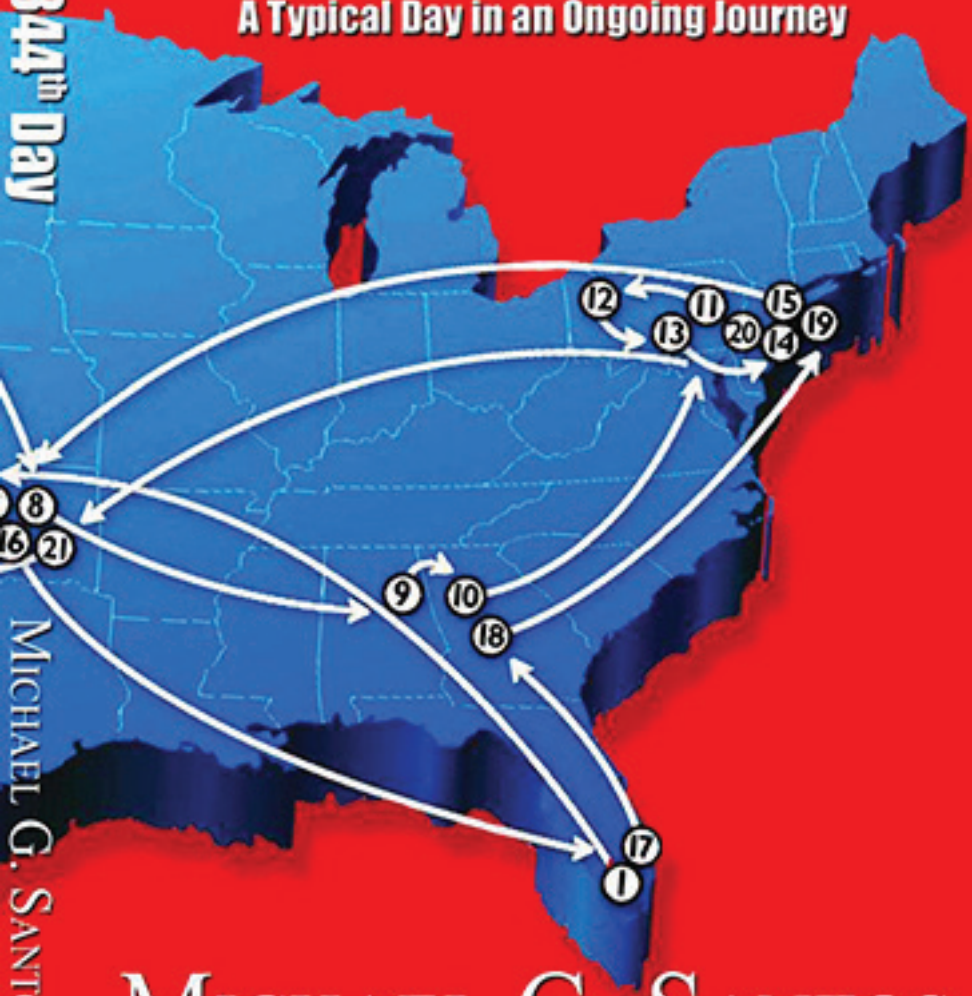
Prison!

My 8,344th Day

A Typical Day in an Ongoing Journey



Michael G. Santos

Prison! My 8,344th Day

Michael G. Santos

APS Publishing

Prison!
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1. MCC Miami 1987
2. FCI El Reno 1987
3. FCI Phoenix 1987
4. Kent Cty Jail 1987
5. Pierce Cty Jail 1987
6. Puyallup, WA 1988
7. Pierce Cty Jail 1988
8. FCI El Reno 1988
9. FCI Talladega 1988
10. USP Atlanta 1988
11. USP Lewisburg 1994
12. FCI McKean 1994
13. USP Lewisburg 1995
14. FCI Fairton 1995
15. FCI Fort Dix 1996
16. FTC Oklahoma 1998
17. FDC Miami 1998
18. USP Atlanta 1998
19. FCI Fort Dix 1998
20. FDC Philadelphia 2003
21. FTC Oklahoma 2003
22. FPC Florence 2003
23. FTC Oklahoma 2003
24. San Bernardino 2005
25. FPC Lompoc 2005
26. FPC Taft 2007
27. Home???

Books by
Michael G. Santos

Inside: Life Behind Bars in America
(St. Martin's Press)

About Prison
(Wadsworth/Thompson Press)

Profiles From Prison
(Greenwood/Praeger Publishing)

Prison! My 8,344th Day
(APS Publishing)

Success! The Straight-A Guide
(APS Publishing)

Triumph! The Straight-A Guide: Conquering Imprisonment and Preparing Offenders for Re-entry
(APS Publishing)

Earning Freedom
(APS Publishing)

For more information visit
www.MichaelSantos.com

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A Typical Day in an Ongoing Journey

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855 Lakeville Street
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To My Loving Wife,
Carole Santos…

I love you, I love you, I love you.

Forward One

Sam Torres, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus
California State University, Long Beach
Senior U.S. Probation Officer (retired)

In this short, easy to read book, Michael Santos provides the reader an insider look in the typical day, #8,344, of a not so typical federal prisoner entering his 24th year of confinement. Although he has been incarcerated at all security levels, Mr. Santos is currently housed in the more relaxed setting of the Taft Federal Prison Camp near Bakersfield California. Having taken my students to visit Mr. Santos, and having personally spent time in the visiting area with him, I can attest to the absence of bitterness, anger, or animosity that is common for persons that have spent this much time in prison. His peaceful and optimistic attitude, though filled with anxiety regarding the challenges that face him upon release, is indeed remarkable.

The book will be of special interest to students of criminal justice, especially as relates to corrections, but it will have appeal to all age groups and to readers in general, as it provides strategies to help deal with life's adversities. That Mr. Santos has maintained his humanity, individualism, and indeed his self-esteem in an environment that tends to obliterate these traits speaks volumes to the success of the strategies he has developed.

While his major goal is to provide the reader with a window into a typical day of one long-term prisoner, this short reader does much more, and perhaps it is in the by-product of this effort that the book provides its most valuable revelations. Consciously or unconsciously, the book allows the reader the opportunity to enter the mind of long-term prisoner Michael Santos. Why he prefers a top bunk in a noisy dormitory of 125 men, avoiding the mess hall, generally avoiding interaction with most other prisoners, accommodations with his cell mate, issues of privacy, the value of phone access, avoiding most contact with staff, daily writing time, exercise routines, and impatiently looking forward to visits from Carole, his wife and the love of his life. We come to understand the honeymoon relationship that appears to exist between Mr. Santos and his wife, but we also are allowed to sense and experience the anxieties and insecurities that attach to prison relationships and the fear of hearing those dreaded words, "I can't do this anymore." He is acutely aware of the hazards associated with underestimating the threat imprisonment inflicts on a marriage and compares sustaining a positive relationship like living in the eye of a hurricane. Holding on to Carole's love is a constant fear and challenge.

In the final analysis, the 8,344th Day does much more than allows the reader to experience a typical day in the life of a long-term prisoner. While it does take the reader through the typical routine in the day of an extraordinary federal prisoner it demonstrates how Mr. Santos has managed to preserve his dignity and individualism during over 23 years of confinement, while attaining a bachelor's and master's degree, and authoring six books. For him, after 23 years of incarceration, prison has become a way of life, the only life he has known as an adult. The book is the astounding story of how one man, after serving 23 years

in institutions that are known for tearing down human beings and extinguishing all hope, will soon leave prison filled with hope and dignity intact. Readers of all ages can learn from Mr. Santos' description of discipline, commitment, and making values-based and goal-centered decisions empowered him to excel and come out of prison whole.

Sam Torres, Ph.D.

Forward Two

George F. Cole
Professor Emeritus of Political Science
University of Connecticut

Michael G. Santos is undoubtedly unique within the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Not only is he serving an unheard of lengthy sentence for a non-violent crime, but during his more than twenty four years of incarceration he has been awarded bachelor's and master's university degrees, published several books, contributed articles to scholarly journals, encyclopedias, and edited volumes, and participated in programs to encourage other prisoners to take steps to earn their freedom.

I was introduced to Michael in 1992 when a political scientist at another university suggested that I might be willing to assist with his graduate work. At that time Michael was in the fifth year of his sentence at the U.S. Penitentiary, Atlanta. Because of my teaching and research on the criminal justice system I was pleased to begin this long-term relationship with a prisoner. In 1994 Michael was transferred to the Federal Correctional Institution, McKean, Bradford, Pennsylvania. Through the enlightened leadership of Warden Dennis Luther, I was placed on Michael's visitor's list as an educational counselor and was thus able to meet with him on several occasions in that and other institutions. Since then I have tried to visit Michael at least once a year, and through telephone calls

and correspondence, have followed his ups and downs as he has dealt with the bureaucracy in twenty six correctional facilities.

Michael believes that those who have been sentenced to prison should take steps to earn their freedom. He urges fellow inmates to use their time in productive ways that will contribute to the wider community. *Prison! My 8,344th Day* describes a "typical day in an ongoing journey." It begins when his alarm goes off following the 1:00 a.m. count by the guards at the Federal Prison Camp, Taft, California. In the pages that follow Michael describes not only the activity in which he is engaged but the reasons why he has chosen to spend his time reading and writing, participating in betterment programs such as the Toastmaster's public speaking club, speaking to Carole (his wife of seven years) over the telephone, maintaining his running and strength training program, completing his assigned prison work, and preparing meals in his cell for him and his cellmate. This latter activity requires further explanation.

Michael believes that there are places in prisons that breed "trouble" and the dining hall is a primary source of name calling, pushing, and fights. He reasons that if he is to maintain a clean disciplinary record he must stay out of places where the actions of others might lead to infractions of the rules. Hence, Michael and David his cellmate, purchase food at the prison commissary and prepare it in their cell using the microwave oven in the dayroom. Day after day a menu of pasta, canned tuna fish, and other non-perishables must be very boring, but perhaps it differs little from prison food. It is the price one pays to stay out of trouble.

Prison! My 8,344th Day has been written not only for general audiences to see how one individual has sur-

vived his long-term of incarceration, but it is also directed at other prisoners to encourage them to follow Michael's example. It is unrealistic to expect that a great number of prisoners will follow this path, but there may be those who will be encouraged to follow this routine. Meanwhile Michael looks forward to his release in 2012 and the opportunity to be with his wife Carole on territory other than the stark visitor's room of Taft.

George F. Cole, Ph.D.

Forward Three

Todd R. Clear
Distinguished Professor
Dean, School of Criminal Justice
Rutgers University

America is the world's leader in incarceration. We invented the prison. We now use it more than any other democratic nation.

We emphasize the prison even after a long history of failure; we hold high hopes for the value of incarceration despite generations of experience that those hopes are unrealistic.

Much of this dysfunctional relationship to imprisonment is enabled by a phenomenal unawareness of the facts about the prison. People think that prisons are "country clubs." They are not. People think that prisons deter people from committing crimes. They do not. People think that everyone who goes to prison is getting "just deserts." This is far from true in many, many cases. People think that going to prison means getting a chance at rehabilitation. Maybe, but not likely.

People think that prison populations have grown, because crime has grown. But there is almost no large-scale relationship between the amount of crime and the number of prisoners.

There is an abiding need for the American public to become more aware of the reality of incarceration in

the United States. We lock up more of our fellow citizens than almost any other country in the world. We spend more on confinement than almost anywhere else. The money we devote to imprisonment produces little in the way of consumable goods or services. It creates low-end, often mind-numbing jobs in the corrections field. It takes resources that could be devoted to other ends in the economy and ties them up in grey cells.

Michael Santos has written volumes about prison in America, and his work goes farther than any body of literature I know to filling in the blank spots in the American consciousness about incarceration. He is by no means a typical prisoner. He is thoughtful, self-critical, and reflective. His enormous energy and potential are squandered in prison time.

This book is about how that time is used. Santos chronicles his 8,344th day behind bars. It is a stunning idea, and log of his day makes for gripping reading. It is remarkable to note what occupies his thoughts: he thinks again and again in deeply devoted ways about his loved ones outside. But he also thinks about the routines of prison life. He works to sustain a dignity of self in the assault against self that constitutes the currency of prison. And he struggles heroically to find the meaning in the disquieting meaninglessness of prison life.

He is only one person behind bars; there are 2 million people like him.

This is a wonderful, telling, compelling book. Read it to learn what our prisons do.

Todd R. Clear, Ph.D.

Forward Four

Joan Petersilia
Adelbert H. Sweet Professor of Law
Stanford University

As someone who has studied the prison system for more than 30 years, I find myself at a total loss for words when I get phone calls from convicts, parents, or family members asking questions like:

* How do I prepare for going to prison?
* What will my day be like in prison?
* How can I help my son or daughter adjust to prison and prepare for release?
* Will my son or daughter ever be able to get a job after prison?

I now have the perfect answer for all of those questions: just read Michael Santos's books! He has done a great service for us all.

Michael writes beautifully and intelligently about some of the most complex issues of our time. He writes about the lifelong implications that accompany poor decisions he made as a young man and he tries to persuade others to think beyond the thrill of the immediate moment.

I highly recommend Michael Santos's books to juvenile justice personnel, teachers, and families who struggle to help young people understand reasons why they

should think about the consequences that frequently follow transgressions.

Mr. Santos, an author, speaker, and inspiring prisoner brings the day-to-day world of living in prison to the outside world. Having been convicted at the age of twenty-three of crimes related to drug trafficking, he has served nearly 25 years behind bars. In *Prison! My 8,344th Day*, he describes a typical day in prison and the challenges it poses. His experience gives us a unique knowledge of survival in prison and how to use it as a time for reflection and preparation for release. Mr. Santos is not embittered by his prison experience but rather is trying to use this experience to inform those who need to understand what life is like behind prison bars.

If we listen to him closely, we may well understand why America's experiment with mass incarceration has failed. That would not only be good for Michael, who will be released from prison soon, but for the rest of society who thinks "what goes on in prisons, stays in prisons." Rather Mr. Santos teaches us that "what goes on in prisons eventually comes back to communities." We should all pay heed to his experience and recommendations for system change. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in prison reform and community justice.

Joan Petersilia, Ph.D.

Nobody is stronger…than someone who came back. There is nothing you can do to such a person because whatever you could do is less than what has already been done to him.

Elie Wiesel
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

Preface

Government statistics show that our nation confines more than 2.3 million people on any given day. To pay the costs of America's prison system (both state and federal), lawmakers deploy $75 billion of taxpayer funds every year according to the Center for Economic and Policy Research.[1] Those funds originate from the same limited resources that must pay for our nation's education system, health care system, and social services. Consequently, as prison budgets expand, resources dwindle for college students, for health care providers, for all types of social services. Despite the massive expenditures to maintain America's prison system, relatively few taxpayers understand what society receives in exchange. Lobbyists who represent the prison system (including the unions and businesses that benefit from this government expenditure) strive to control the message. They argue for increasing prison budgets and they work aggressively to fight any type of prison reform. They like to predict chaos and lawlessness, stating these would be the results of reforms that might allow for shorter terms and earlier release. Some do not espouse the maxims that 'truth can never originate

[1] Center for Economic and Policy Research / 1611 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 400 / Washington DC 20009 / www.CEPR.net

from lies,' or that 'a nation confident in its judicial system should not shy away from mercy.'

I am a prisoner who does not expect any type of relief from the sentence my judge imposed in 1987, when I was 23 and convicted of selling cocaine. Since then I've worked consistently to reconcile with society, to earn freedom and to prepare for triumph over the obstacles I expect to encounter upon release.

I strive to contribute by writing as a way of opening a window into America's prison system. The more transparency placed on this growing subculture behind bars, the better equipped taxpayers become at making informed decisions. With more insight taxpayers may more effectively evaluate the policies governing long-term imprisonment and whether those policies serve the best interests of America's enlightened society.

As those who support and generously sponsor my work bring this book to press, in August of 2010, I have more than 23 full years of imprisonment behind me. In the pages that follow I describe a typical day at this stage of my journey.

My life differs from what others might expect of a long-term prisoner. It is enriched by many blessings, and it is without bitterness, anger, or animosity toward anyone. With resources and a support network that will allow me to enjoy the remainder of my life as a law-abiding, contributing citizen, I am well prepared to emerge from prison unscathed.

A back-of-the-envelope cost analysis reveals that my long-term imprisonment has not been inexpensive. The Bureau of Prisons has a 2010 budget of $6.1 billion. In dividing that number by the approximately 210,000 people confined in federal prison, I arrive at an annual "per-pris-

oner" cost of $29,000. Some simple math illustrates that taxpayers have (thus far) spent $647,000 to confine me. But I'm scheduled to serve another 1,155 days, until August 12, 2013, costing taxpayers another $91,707—for a total of $738,707 for my confinement.

Lobbyists argue that America needs more rather than less spending on its prison system. I would counter that argument by pointing out that tens of thousands of nonviolent offenders serve sentences that are far too long and do more harm to society than good. Those sentences render individuals less likely to function upon release than when they began, as high recidivism rates make clear. Further, newspapers now report problems of intergenerational recidivism, where the children of prisoners join them behind bars. Although prison may be necessary in measurable doses, it isn't a panacea and too much of it brings diminishing returns.

I was as ready for release as I would ever be after completing my eighth year. By then I had earned an undergraduate degree from Mercer University and a graduate degree from Hofstra University. At that time my confinement had already cost taxpayers $232,000—an expenditure of $506,707 less than what taxpayers will ultimately spend to keep me, just one man, in prison. The cost savings would have gone a long way toward funding programs for more worthy causes than warehousing humanity.

To provide fellow citizens a window into a typical day of one long-term prisoner, I offer a description of my 8,344th day, 14 June 2010.

Michael G. Santos
August, 2010

Prison!
My 8,344th Day

It's still dark in the housing unit when my eyes open. I press the button on my Timex Ironman watch and see that I've overslept. It's 1:34 in the morning on Monday, 14 June 2010, my 8,344th day in prison.

I prefer to wake in time to begin my work as soon as the two guards pass by for the 1:00 a.m. census count. I'm 30 minutes late. But I'm well rested and I sit up.

My neck hurts. This prison bunk bed consists of a thin mattress over two slabs of steel that are supported by four steel posts. I sleep on the top rack. At 46, it's no surprise that I have some skeletal quirks like neck and shoulder aches—I've been sleeping on steel racks like this for 8,344 nights. While twisting my torso and bending my neck from side to side

to loosen up, I pull my earplugs out. David, my cellmate, breathes deeply on the rack beneath me, and I hear much louder snoring from the 125 other men who share this dorm-style housing unit. One advantage of beginning my day at this early hour is the illusion of privacy it creates.

I have two institution-issue knit blankets, but they're lightweight and offer little in the way of warmth. I sleep in gray sweats, a gray thermal shirt, socks, and a

wool beanie that I pull down over my eyes to block the light from exit signs and floor lights that burn non-stop. I've forgotten what it feels like to sleep in total darkness.

After folding my two white blankets, I place them at the head of the rack and drop my pillow on top. Then I slide my legs over the edge and climb down. The plastic chair that I position beside the bed each afternoon before I sleep breaks my drop to the bare concrete floor. I slide into foam shower shoes and place the chair in front of my metal locker.

The locker holds all of the personal belongings that I'm allowed to possess. It stands about five feet tall and, with yellowish enamel paint, it resembles every other prison locker I've used. I keep it organized with an eye toward maximizing the space. The top left compartment holds toiletries. The two compartments below hold food items from my weekly commissary purchase. Bags of dried beans and rice stacked 10 packages high line the back wall. In front of those packages are 10 to 15 vacuum-sealed packs of tuna and a bag of sliced wheat bread sits beside the tuna. The compartment below holds plastic bottles of hot sauce, seasonings, fiber, almonds, coffee, and vitamins that I frequently forget to take. The compartment to the right holds sweats, my running gear, khaki pants, and underwear. And the long compartment at the bottom holds my stacks of paper, books, and sneakers.

While sitting in front of my locker with both doors open, I grab my plastic cup and brace it between my knees as I pull a plastic jar of Taster's Choice instant coffee from the second compartment on the left, unscrew the red lid, and drop two spoonfuls into my cup.

After quietly replacing the jar in the locker, I grab my writing gear: a black vinyl notebook, white typing

paper, an assortment of mail that I've received (but not yet answered), a dictionary, and my Day-Timer planner. I take another cup that holds my toothbrush, toothpaste, toilet paper, and several blue Bic ballpoint pens. With the writing gear under my arm, the cup of coffee and the cup of hygiene supplies gripped in my hand, I stand and grasp the knit mesh bag that holds my laundry and I leave my cubicle, headed toward the laundry room.

I drop my load of clothes into the washer, turn on the cycle, then walk out toward the quiet room where I spend hours writing every day.

The guard on the graveyard shift gives me a nod, but we don't speak. I pass him every morning at this time. He sits at his station, a wad of chewing tobacco in his mouth and a shadow of whiskers darkening his face, flipping through a tabloid.

I enter the quiet room and close the wooden door behind me, then set my books on the round Formica-topped table. Except for the sound of forced air blowing through the HVAC system in the ceiling, the room is silent. With a stated occupancy limit of 14, it's about the size of a small bedroom in a modern house. I sit in a plastic chair (one of the two assigned to my cubicle that I leave in here) at the table; each leg has a yellow tennis ball positioned on the bottom so it slides quietly over the concrete floor. One of the white, concrete-block walls has two large, narrow windows that overlook the central compound of Taft Camp. Each window is about eight feet tall by four feet wide, beginning at knee level and extending to the ceiling. Although it's dark outside, I can see the glow of institutional lights in the distance. This early morning hour is my favorite time of the day, and I cherish every minute of solitude.

My ritual is the same every morning: I open my Day-Timer planner to record the hour and minute my eyes opened, then I spread out my papers. On the inside of my black notebook I keep a picture of Carole, my wife, and me together. The guard picks up mail at 3:00 a.m., so I use the early morning to either write something that I'll mail or I resume work on my current project. This morning I decide to write Carole a quick letter. But first, I stand, grab my two plastic cups and walk to the community bathroom to brush my teeth.

There are five sinks on each side, each in front of a stainless steel surface that serves as a mirror. I use the one toward the back of the room because it's the mirror with the fewest scratches and it provides the best reflection, but it's still like looking into a skillet. On the way out, I use the hot water spigot to fill my coffee cup.

* * * * * * *

1:47 a.m.

I'm back in the quiet room. In just over an hour I'll have to return to my cubicle for the 3:00 a.m. census count. I address an envelope for Carole, then begin writing her a love letter.

Nothing brings more pride, meaning, or gratification to my life than the marriage Carole and I build upon. We married in a prison visiting room nearly seven years ago and she has been the reason for every decision I've made since she came into my life. Few men who have served lengthy prison terms enjoy the luxury of a good family.

Yesterday afternoon, before I concluded my day, I sent Carole an envelope with my work. Whenever guards carry mail out of the housing unit I make sure that the mail sack always includes at least one envelope for my

Michael and Carole Santos
Taft Camp, December 2009

wife. Today's sack will carry two. Keeping our marriage alive through all of these years in prison requires a daily commitment. I do everything within my power to show Carole how I live in here, how I use the time available to plan for our life after my release. I anticipate many challenges and obstacles ahead, and preparing to triumph over them is one way that I express my love and appreciation for her.

I write her to tell her "I love you, I love you, I love you," as I frequently do. Then I describe my progress on a manuscript I'm writing, tell her about my optimism that this prison may soon offer access to email, and I give her a description of the work I expect to complete before our visit on Friday, only four more wake-up days from now, in about 100 hours.

It's 2:23 when I finish writing the second page, and as I fold the letter to stuff in the envelope I think of Carole sleeping. Now that I'm moving through the final 10 percent of my time in prison, I drift into these fantasies much more frequently. I sit here in solitude, losing minutes of valuable work time with thoughts of what it will feel like to be free, to live with my wife, to touch her.

In years past I rarely thought about going home, a concept that didn't register. But now, as I approach the end of my confinement I think about the time when finding privacy won't require that I wake before 2:00 every morning. I think about what it will be like to sleep in a real bed, to look over and see the woman who has loved me for so long and whom I love. What challenges will we face? At 2:29 I stop my daydream and walk out of the room to drop Carole's envelope in the outgoing mail slot.

Back at the table, I resume my work on *White Collar*, a manuscript that I'll use as a tool to educate busi-

ness professionals on the ways that inattention to ethics can lead to struggles with the criminal justice system. The more I read about corporate scandals—or about people who make unethical decisions to enrich themselves or who cut corners to advance their careers—the more convinced I become that I can earn a living by teaching about the consequences that follow bad decisions.

This morning I'm writing about Walter, a former senior officer for a global corporation that was in the business of manufacturing rubber. I interviewed him one afternoon several months ago. He became enmeshed in a price-fixing agreement with two of his competitors, and that agreement amounted to unfair business practices that violated antitrust laws. Walter has since concluded his sentence, but from the notes I took during the interview and from my memory of him, I can write a profile—one of many profiles that I'll include in this new manuscript.

* * * * * * *

I have a goal of finishing *White Collar* (and several other manuscripts) before the middle of 2011. The manuscript differs from others I've written because rather than writing about my experiences, I'm profiling some of the interesting men serving time with me. Their stories should provide teachable lessons, lessons that describe how well-educated professionals consider themselves law-abiding citizens make decisions that result in their becoming targets of criminal investigations.

I learn from interviewing men who serve time for white-collar crimes. Many do not consider themselves criminals. They speak about internal pressures that they faced over one issue or another. Their professional positions gave them the capacity to commit the crime, but many don't consider the act of bribery, tax evasion,

or violations of securities laws as being terribly criminal. Many rationalize their actions, thinking it a real injustice that they are in prison alongside drug offenders and other criminals.

White Collar will include between 15 and 20 separate profiles, each about 2,500 words. I know the publishing industry is in a state of transition now, and I am skeptical on whether a mainstream publisher will bring this manuscript to market. Yet with the advances in technology, including the many Web opportunities, on-demand printing services, and e-books, I'm confident about self-publishing *White Collar* and creating a market for my books. The important focus for me now is on collecting content.

* * * * * * *

I make some progress on Walter's profile, completing nearly a full page of writing before I look at my watch and see it is already 2:48. I stretch, then walk to the laundry room and transfer my clothes from the washing machine to the dryer. There isn't much because I wash a load of clothes every morning. I return to my cubicle, nodding at the second guard who has arrived to assist the other with the 3:00 a.m. census count. The guards on this shift are used to seeing me. They know I use the quiet time to write and they don't interrupt my solitude with small talk. I appreciate their consideration. The longer I can avoid talking each morning, the better I feel.

* * * * * * *

More than 500 men serve time in Taft camp, and almost everyone knows me by name. My sentence is longer than any other man's sentence in this camp and it arouses curiosity. People frequently ask how I do it. In reality, all I'm doing is living, trying to make the most of every day

and to find meaning in the process. I'm polite, courteous to everyone, but at this stage of the journey I try to minimize interactions with anyone unless the conversations relate to my work.

My focus is different, now, than it was during my initial adjustment, and different from those who traverse shorter terms. I was 23 when I began serving time in the United States Penitentiary Atlanta, certainly one of the youngest men in the penitentiary. I didn't have the autonomy that I now enjoy because (despite not having a history of violence or weapons) I started in high-security with old-time convicts, all of whom wore the tell-tale signs of long-term imprisonment. I felt vulnerable there, but I was determined to make decisions that would ensure I matured during the many years I expected to serve. Even so, despite my 45-year sentence, back then I couldn't bring myself to believe more than two and a half decades would ultimately pass before I became eligible for release on parole.

* * * * * * *

2:54 a.m.

In the bathroom, I rinse out my plastic coffee mug in the sink, use the toilet again, then wash up. It's still dark outside. I walk 58 paces down the long, narrow corridor that leads to my cubicle—the last one—number 15, in the back of the housing unit.

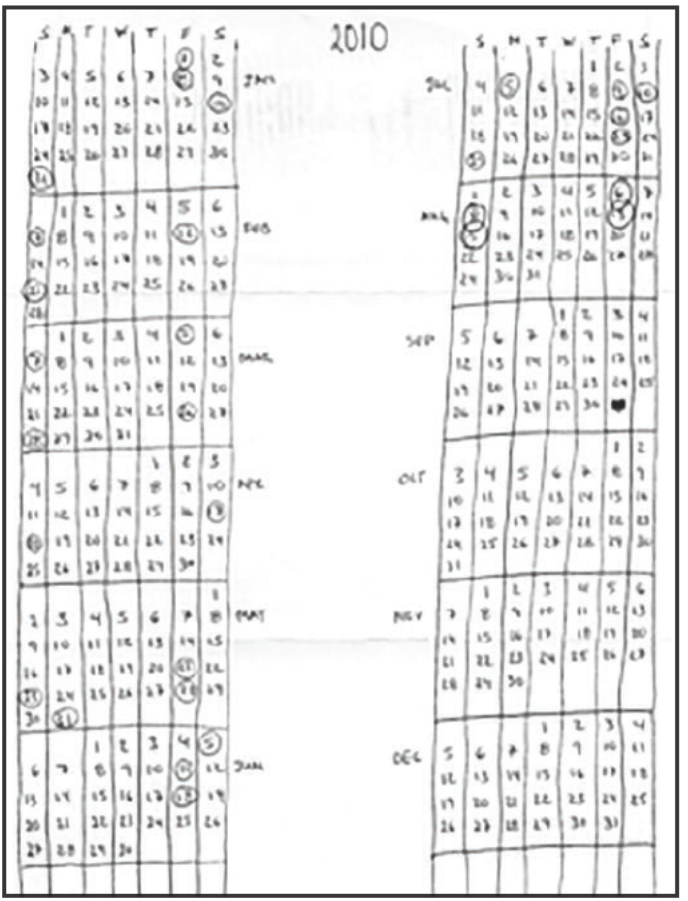
As I make my way down the hall, I'm contemplating the profile I've begun writing about Walter. It's really just a story about how one man who didn't consider himself a criminal pled guilty to breaking the law. I've met thousands of men who served time for white-collar crimes with similar attitudes. Business people may find value in learning how decisions they make every day could expose

them to troubles with the criminal justice system. If I can create a lesson plan for a 20-hour course, I'll have a product to sell to human resource managers and other corporate trainers.

I turn right into my cubicle and hear my roommate, David, breathing heavily under the covers. He's sleeping on the lower rack, which is generally the preferred spot. I could have asked for a lower rack, but I much prefer the top rack in a quiet area of the dorm to a bottom rack in a louder area where I would be surrounded by noise. I adjust my plastic chair, turning it 90 degrees away from David's sleeping form so the chair faces the hallway and I sit to wait for the two guards to count.

On the inside of my locker door I have photographs of Carole and me together from various prison visiting rooms. Beneath one photograph I have a calendar that I drew by hand showing all the days of 2010. On it, I've circled the days that Carole and I have visited. This year's calendar shows fewer circles than in years past, only between two and four during each month between January and June. I stare at the calendar for a moment, looking forward to advancing through the last six months of 2010.

I anticipate many positive changes as we move through the second half of this year. The obvious plus is that when this year ends I'll be closer to my release date. But knowing good things happen between now and then bolsters my spirits. For one, Carole is on summer break from nursing school until mid-August, and that means she will visit once every week. Visiting with her is the highlight of my life in here. We've sacrificed weekly visits through the first half of this year so that she could complete her final year. In mid-August she resumes school to finish the last semester.


2010
JAN
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OCT
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DEC

Although I'll have to struggle with fewer visits when she returns to school, the rumor around the camp is that prisoners will have access to email services by then. I've never sent or received an email message, but I'm really looking forward to using this technology. It may help me connect with more people, stay more current, create more support that will help my transition upon release. I can't stop thinking about all the challenges that will confront me when I walk out of prison gates. I feel ready, but in every hour I'm awake, I'm thinking about what more I can do to prepare.

* * * * * * *

2:59 a.m.

I press the button to light the face of my Timex. The guards will pass by soon. I reach to my left, into the second compartment of my locker, and pull out a bag of whole-wheat bread. I unlock the twist tie, open the bag, and take one slice that I set on my knee while I spin the bag, and fasten it closed with the twist tie. Then I lean back on my chair, prop my feet on the wall of concrete blocks, and listen for the sound of clinging keys as guards walk down the corridor counting prisoners in their racks.

Each week I buy a new package of bread from the commissary so I can savor a slice while I wait for the 3:00 a.m. census count to clear. While the guards count, I take small bites. It's fresh. I don't use butter or any type of spread. I eat the crust first, nibbling around the outer edges. Then I bite into the doughy part and chew each bite slowly, thinking about my future.

I wonder about the progress I'll make in the months and years to come. I'm scheduled to serve 38 more months, but a combination of parole and halfway house placement (I expect) will mean that I leave prison

in about two years. *What else can I do to prepare?* I'll be hatched into the world at 48, without clothes or anything else men my age take for granted. *What will I have to buy? How much will it all cost?*

I start adding. To launch my career I'll need modern technology. I don't know prices, but I expect computers and communications equipment will cost about $15,000. Perhaps that is too high. Maybe $10,000 to purchase clothes, and I might need a vehicle. With $30,000 I should be able to meet all of my immediate needs, and I'm confident that Carole and I will have more than that in savings when I leave prison. Since she'll earn a good wage as a registered nurse, I won't have the immediate pressure of earning an income. My adjustment to the world should be much easier than other men who have been separated from society for so long.

I'm halfway through chewing my bread slice when the guards walk in front of my cubicle. They count David and me, turn, and their keys jingle as they move toward the front of the housing unit, counting prisoners along the way. It's 3:01. My thoughts about the future persist.

By next March I will have lived more than half of my life as a prisoner. It's my handicap and I'm always considering the implications. With unemployment rates at historic highs, my long prison record, my lack of a work history, and my age, the prospects of being hired by anyone are slim. I will have to monetize what I've learned and experienced through all of the years I've served in prisons of every security level. One of the ways I'll earn a living will be by consulting with people who are about to face imprisonment.

The Web sites that Carole and I have built must become a source of revenue for me. Thousands of peo-

ple visit those sites every week. *What can I do to increase the traffic?* From here I can only write blogs and articles every day. But once I'm home I'll be able to publish informational videos about this system. I'm certain people will find value in that instruction. If I had found someone to explain the prison system and my options at the start of my confinement, I would have made better decisions than those that led to my lengthy sentence. It's important that others find the work I publish that describes imprisonment—I need the right technology to make it happen.

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3:04 a.m.

I hear the guards walking down the corridor on the other side of my cubicle. Their jingling keys and heavy jackboots disturb the peace of night. In about three more minutes I can return to the quiet room.

My thoughts wander to a visit I had a few weeks ago with Dr. Sam Torres, a professor of criminal justice at California State University in Long Beach and a mentor I respect.

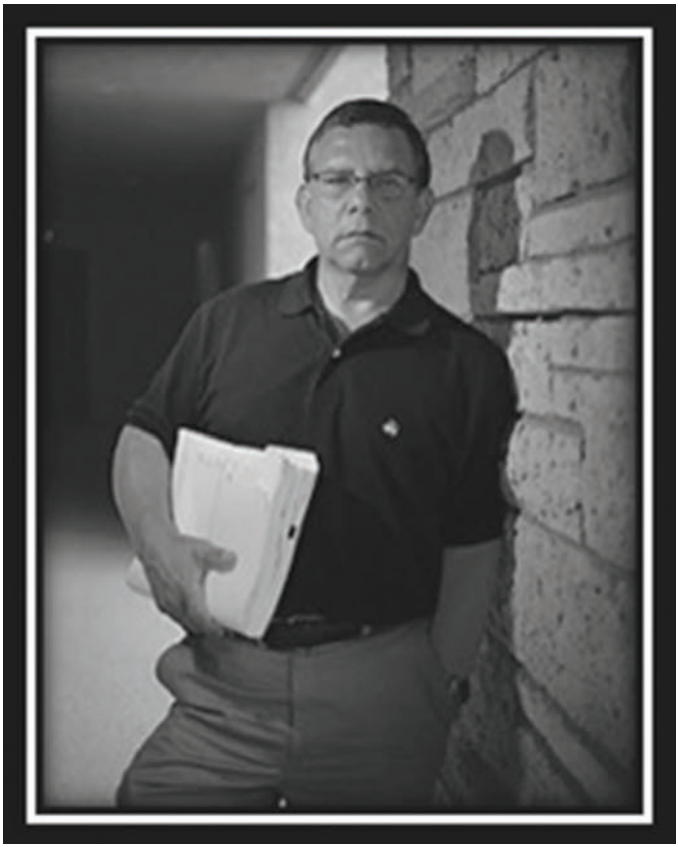
Prior to his academic career, Sam had a long history as a senior federal probation officer. He and I began corresponding several years ago when he was using my first book, *About Prison*, as a supplemental text for courses he was teaching in corrections.

During our visit, Sam and I discussed my career plans upon release. I expressed confidence that I was well prepared to overcome the challenges of re-entry. I have an undergraduate degree and a graduate degree; I've authored several books; I've built a strong network of support; I have a loving wife, a Web site that will generate a steady income, and savings to meet my expenses.

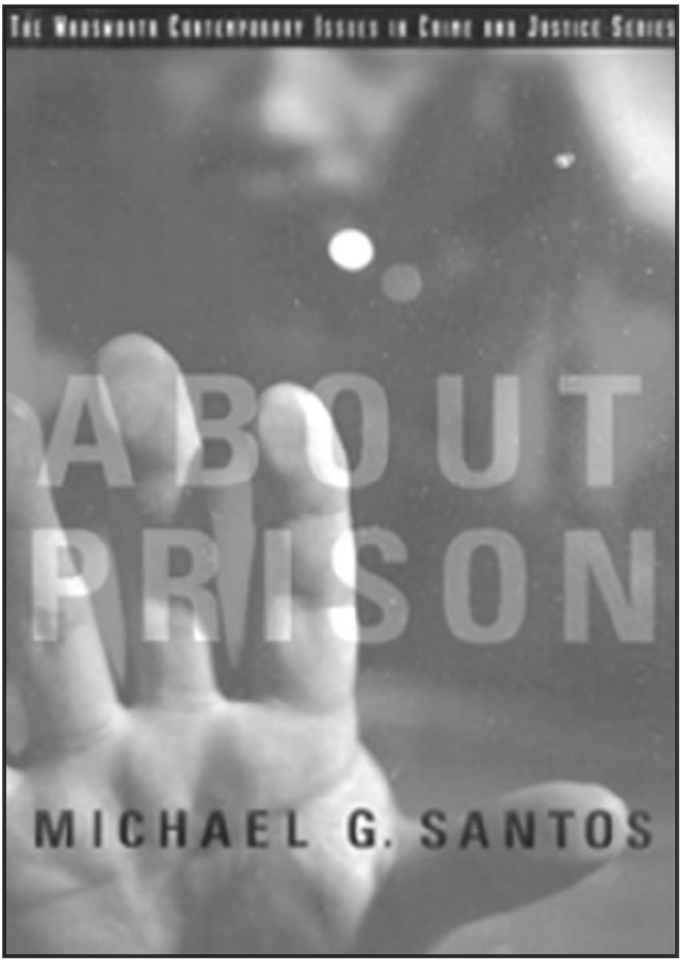
Taken together, I told Sam during our visit, I expected that the probation officer who supervised my release would be supportive. Sam's response totally shook me and unsettled my confidence.

"He might want to keep a close watch over you," Sam said. "He might want to make sure you're not selling dope again."

Several weeks have passed since that visit with Sam, but I haven't been able to stop thinking about the cynicism he warned me to expect. I think of it every day. It feels like the sword of Damocles hanging over my neck. Whereas I thought I had built a record that would engen-



Sam Torres, Ph.D.
California State University, Long Beach



Cover image of *About Prison* by Michael G. Santos

der trust by living transparently, as an open book, Sam's message warned me that regardless of the work I've done over the past 23 years, a probation officer may never see beyond the bad decisions of my early 20s.

I am grateful for the insight into what I should expect, but Sam's admonishment brings anxiety. He later clarified his statement by telling me that just as I have met some prison officers who were helpful and others who were not supportive; my probation officer could go either way. I appreciate Sam's mentoring and I intend to prove worthy of his support. Nevertheless, I anticipate many obstacles.

I've read extensively about imprisonment and about the struggles that afflict former prisoners who try to acclimate to society after release. I am determined to live a law-abiding, contributing, and honorable life, but I cannot dismiss the threat of recidivism rates that exceed 60 percent. The thought of returning to prison, or of any further confrontations with the criminal justice system, torments me even in sleep.

By the time I had served a few years in prison, all of my dreams had some relationship to imprisonment. Recently, since I've been moving to within striking distance of release, the dreams have become nightmares that I'm facing a return to prison. I intend to leave prison strong, with the support and resources necessary to reintegrate with society. But Dr. Torres speaks from the wisdom of experience and I would be foolish to dismiss it.

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3:07 a.m.

I stand and lean outside my cubicle. The guards have moved on so I know the count has cleared. By 3:08 I've returned to my chair in the quiet room, papers scat-

tered on the Formica table just as I had left them. I continue writing Walter's story.

At 3:38 a reflection appears in the tall window in front of me, drawing my attention. With the darkness of night outside, the window is like a mirror where I can see myself at the table and I can see the hallway through the windows behind me. Two prisoners walk by, each carrying the gray vinyl mat and pillow from his rack. One opens the door leading into the storage room and they both walk in. When they walk out, their arms are empty. As they pass by, they look in the window and see me at the desk. One of the men waves, and I nod in reply.

The two men are being released. I've seen them around but I don't know either one. Still, I stand and walk closer to the outer window when I hear the guard's keys unlocking the heavy door of the housing unit. I want to watch them walk out of the prison. I follow their movements as they descend the stairs into darkness and walk up the wide concrete pathway that leads to the camp's control center. When they open the door, light from the hallway illuminates their walk to freedom.

A few times each week I watch as other prisoners leave, each carrying a box of belongings. My time will come, but I don't expect that my sentence will conclude while I'm in this camp. In fact, unless some type of extraordinary relief hastens my release, I will transfer from this camp to another prison before the spring of 2011, and a strong possibility exists that I'll transfer as soon as December, in only six more months.

I don't know where the prisoners go from here… probably a few hours of processing, then either a transfer to another prison or release to a halfway house somewhere. Maybe they've completed their sentences entirely

and they're really going home.

I am one of relatively few federal prisoners remaining in the system who is eligible for review by the parole board; no other prisoner in this camp has eligibility for parole and the board doesn't meet here. I'm required to transfer to a prison where the parole board holds hearings.

Carole and I hope that I'll be transferred to the prison camp in Sheridan, Oregon. In the end, though, it doesn't matter all that much where authorities transfer me. When I arrive at the next prison Carole will relocate to the same city and she'll easily find work as a nurse. She'll arrange her schedule in a way that allows us to visit as frequently as possible. This transfer will be my last, and I won't have much longer than one year to serve before I carry my own box of belongings and walk free from prison boundaries. Home. It's a surreal thought to me. *What does that mean?*

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3:51 a.m.

Moving away from the window, I return to my chair and sit. I'm not walking out of prison today. I curse myself for allowing fantasy to distract me from writing. I refocus my attention and put pen to paper, describing Walter's background and professional experience. When the guard walks by the window behind me I see that an hour of total concentration has passed. I've written the first six pages, about 1,500 words and I'm more than halfway finished with the draft of Walter's profile. It's time to break for the 5:00 a.m. census count.

4:51 a.m.

I leave the quiet room and walk past the two guards. They're speaking softly so as not to disturb the

prisoners who sleep only 10 yards away. Since they don't acknowledge me I walk straight to the laundry room and gather my clothes from the dryer. As I carry the bundle of clothes down the long hallway to my cubicle, I feel the housing unit coming to life. Several prisoners pass me in a rush to use the bathroom before the count begins. I nod to a few. Nearly four hours have elapsed and I've yet to speak to anyone. Very good! I cherish the silence.

David is still sleeping quietly and I'm careful not to make any noise that would disturb him. I fold the clothes that I pulled from the dryer. The bundle includes elastic-waist khaki pants, one white t-shirt, one gray tank top, two pairs of gray running shorts, underwear, one pair of socks, and one white headband. I separate the running gear that I'll wear later, put the socks and underwear in the right-hand compartment of my locker, and put the pants and white t-shirt on a plastic hanger. It's now 4:57. I reach for my Sony Walkman radio.

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I don't listen to the radio much, and I rarely watch television. As far as I'm concerned, both activities rob me of time I could use to prepare for the challenges I expect to face upon release. Sometimes, though, I would like to watch television. Every weekend the camp administration rents movies for the institutional television system. This past weekend was *Invictus*. I read great reviews of the film that depicts aspects of Nelson Mandela's imprisonment. Mr. Mandela is a role model of mine, an inspiration to me as he is to millions of other people around the world. I read his biography, *A Long Walk to Freedom*, many years ago and I would like to watch the movie that shows his remarkable success in contributing to a better world. But one of the lessons I learned from reading about Mr. Man-

dela's experience was that a man must discipline himself to overcome adversity. It was the same lesson I learned from other men who turned their imprisonment into lasting contributions to mankind, including Viktor Frankl, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Elie Weisel. From them I learned discipline and for me that requires me to forgo watching television for entertainment. Every choice I make in here is part of a deliberate purpose to prepare for release and, for the most part, I choose to do without entertainment at this stage.

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The radio keeps me informed of current events. I insert ear buds to listen, but NPR hasn't yet begun to broadcast the news. While waiting, I press the button that changes the station to classic rock and listen to *Hotel California* by The Eagles. I switch back to NPR just in time for the familiar jingle announcing the 5:00 a.m. news.

While I listen to more reports about the devastating oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, I put my things away in my cubicle. David's locker stands beside the head of my rack and I use the top surface of his locker each afternoon to hold my reading material before I sleep. I pick up my Bible, a book of Eastern spirituality, and *How*, a hardcover by Dov Seidman that I've been reading. The books fit in the right-hand compartment of my locker. I put a bowl and a water jug away. The guards pass by my cubicle at 5:02. Time to change into my running gear.

I put on two pair of shorts (underwear gives me a rash if I wear it while running), a tank top, and black Nike running shoes that I received from the commissary last week. I put on my white headband and rest my sunglasses on my head. I grab a set of orange ear plugs and my identification card. With everything put away, I take off my ra-

dio and return it to my locker. I'm now leaning out of my cubicle, watching for a sign that the guards have finished.

The movement of other prisoners walking toward the front of the housing unit gives me a sign that the count has cleared, so I grab the hanger that holds my khakis and white t-shirt, then head toward the quiet room. On the way, I stop at Tim's cubicle and hang my clothes on a hook at the entrance.

Tim is another prisoner in the camp, a young man in his 20s. He supports himself with domestic work around the unit—cleaning cubicles, doing laundry, and ironing. In exchange for ironing seven items for me (either pants or shirts) he receives a book of my stamps.

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Prison rules prohibit one prisoner from giving anything of value to another prisoner. Although guards have written a few disciplinary infractions against me over the decades, the only one that has ever stuck has been for giving something of value to another prisoner. It's a disciplinary infraction of moderate severity. I was charged and found guilty through a kangaroo court (the prison's disciplinary hearing process) of paying another prisoner to clean my cell. That was eleven years ago, in May of 1999. I contested the charge because of a technicality: I didn't pay him, someone else did. In the end, the finders of fact convicted me and sanctioned me with the loss of commissary privileges for 30 days. That price I was willing to pay.

Early in my term, when I accepted that I would serve a lengthy sentence, I made it my business to understand how prisons operate. The U.S. Congressional Printing Office publishes a series of books known as the *Code of Federal Regulations*—the CFR. In Title 28 of the CFR, section 500, I found the rules that govern federal prisons.

The volume is available in all federal prison law libraries, and every few years I reserve a half a day to read through the rules to keep myself current. Understanding the rules is the first step to mastering them.

But understanding the rules doesn't mean that I commit to following them all religiously. My objective is to emerge from prison successfully, with skills and resources that enable me to land on my feet and live the rest of my life as a law-abiding citizen in pursuit of fulfillment. I am indifferent to the label "model inmate." In fact, I find the term *inmate* condescending. A counselor once tried to pay me a compliment by saying she considered me a convict rather than an inmate, but a label of *convict* insults me as well. I may be imprisoned, and thus, a prisoner, but I am also a man, an American citizen, a husband, son, brother, uncle, and friend. I am many things beyond prisoner.

I only violate rules when doing so will help me overcome the cycle of failure that prisons perpetuate. For example, instead of abiding by rules and ironing my own clothes, I pay Tim to iron them for me. If I were to iron the clothes myself, I would expose myself to the potential for conflict. The housing unit has only one iron for 125 prisoners. I choose to avoid as many unnecessary interactions with other prisoners as possible. That's a defense mechanism. I can control my own behavior, but I cannot control the behavior of others, and I understand how petty annoyances can send unbalanced prisoners over the edge. So I take precautions.

Latent volatility exists in these environments. Regardless of security level, all prisons separate men from their wives, their children, and their communities. News from home isn't always good. Wives and loved ones some-

times move on, and prisoners who receive unexpected or unwelcome news can snap. I've known men who—although once well adjusted—became crazed after they received bad news from home. The less exposure I have to such volatility, the safer I remain. It's the means I employ to control my environment, insure my stability, and reach my goals. Avoiding the iron is one of the many choices I make to further this end.

Washing my own clothes doesn't expose me to the same problems as ironing. When I load clothes into the washer, before 2:00 each morning, almost everyone in my housing unit is asleep. I'm not risking exposure to the possibility of confrontation. My clothes are washed, dried, and folded before most men wake so it's not a problem. But I'd rather pay Tim to iron them each day, and I willingly accept the risk that comes with violating the prison rule.

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5:06 a.m.

I begin to write my daily blog entry for the prison journal Carole publishes on our Web site. Although I've never had direct access to the Internet, I read extensively and I'm well aware of its immense power. By reading books about how people use the Web, I've learned that I can help more people find my work by publishing fresh, relevant content every day.

When release comes, some citizens will express reservations about my commitment to live as a law-abiding American. My Web site and the thousands of pages published there will be a source of validation, an extended résumé and proof of my transparency. That's one of the reasons I post a daily journal describing my observations and experiences in prison. Another reason I write about

prison is that I know family members of all prisoners hunger for information about their loved ones and how they live. I aspire to offer them hope, to show them that even through lengthy terms of imprisonment people can create meaningful, contributing, positive lives.

At the bottom of my daily journal entry I record the progress I have made toward my exercise goals. Fitness has been a central part of my adjustment from the beginning. In December of 2008 I made a commitment to run every day until I hit 500 days. In 2010 I furthered my commitment by adding strength training: pledging 100,000 pushups before year's end. As of yesterday I had run 548 days without a day off. During that time I've run a total distance of 4,877 miles. And since January 1st of 2010, I've completed 63,000 pushups in increments of between 2,000 and 4,000 each week.

5:38 a.m.

I finish writing blog number 919 and stand to look out the window. The sun is up, shining brilliant yellow in the clear, blue sky. I know it's going to be another spectacular day of California sunshine, with temperatures eventually reaching between 85 and 90 degrees. I thank God for allowing me to serve this portion of my sentence in such an easygoing environment.

I always see the good in the prisons that hold me. That probably sounds somewhat delusional to outsiders, but by living a goal-centered adjustment I make progress wherever administrators assign me. While I was held in Atlanta, McKean, Fairton, Fort Dix, Florence, and Lompoc, I found or created opportunities that would prepare or strengthen me for challenges ahead.

These past three years were no exception and I'll miss Taft Camp when I transfer. Experience, however, has

taught me that it's not the prison that makes a person's time productive. The grass is greenest wherever a person waters it, and a good prison adjustment begins with a good attitude. I'll adjust well anywhere.

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5:45 a.m.

I can't go outside until the officers finish their shift-change routine, and the guard who works the day shift hasn't arrived yet. I'm impatient, eager to begin my exercise, but if I were to leave the quiet room now I would run into the crowd of prisoners who stand chatting in the housing unit's front area. They, too, want to go outside, but most will walk to the chow hall for the breakfast meal rather than head to the recreation yard. I've been awake and working for longer than four hours, and I still haven't spoken to anyone. I'm free to think as I wait.

Someone left the *New York Times* from Sunday, May 23rd on the table. Although three weeks have passed since it was published, the paper is new to me. I flip through the pages and pull out the magazine section, where I find an article about California's three strikes sentencing law by Emily Bazelon. She is a writer and scholar from the law school at Yale University. I begin reading her story, but before I can finish I see the day-shift officer walking toward the housing unit. It's 5:57, and time to go exercise.

I tear the article from the magazine so I can finish it later, then put it in a stack with my other writing materials already neatly organized on the table. I'm confident no one will disturb my books and papers while I exercise, so I don't mind leaving things unattended.

In the right pocket of my running shorts I have a set of orange ear plugs and I pull them out, roll each

between my thumb and index finger, and insert one into each ear. I'm ready to go.

When I open the door to leave the quiet room, I'm immediately surrounded by scores of other prisoners who are walking out. The breakfast menu indicates that today's meal is scrambled eggs, oatmeal, and a sausage patty. Breakfast never interests me because I don't like to exercise with more than the early-morning slice of bread in my stomach. I descend the stairs of my housing unit, then turn right toward the track, weaving my way through the men who converse while they walk.

5:59 a.m.

When I reach the track the air already feels warm. Here we have more than 300 days of sunshine every year, and although temperatures rise into the triple digits on some days during the summer months, it's always pleasant before 9:00 a.m.

I pull off my tank top, fold it around my ID card and set it on the steel bleachers in front of the basketball court. In this camp I'm free to run without a shirt and I am grateful for this privilege. Before transferring to Taft Camp I hadn't been allowed to run without a shirt since 1995, when I was in the Federal Correctional Institution at McKean, in Pennsylvania.

About 17 other regular, early morning exercisers are in the recreation area with me. They're jamming to music that blasts through their headphones or talking among themselves. I still have not said one word aloud since opening my eyes at 1:34 this morning.

This oval track has a much bigger perimeter than a typical quarter-mile track at most high schools. It's not well-maintained, with slopes and ruts, and fist-sized rocks protruding through the surface in various places. Al-

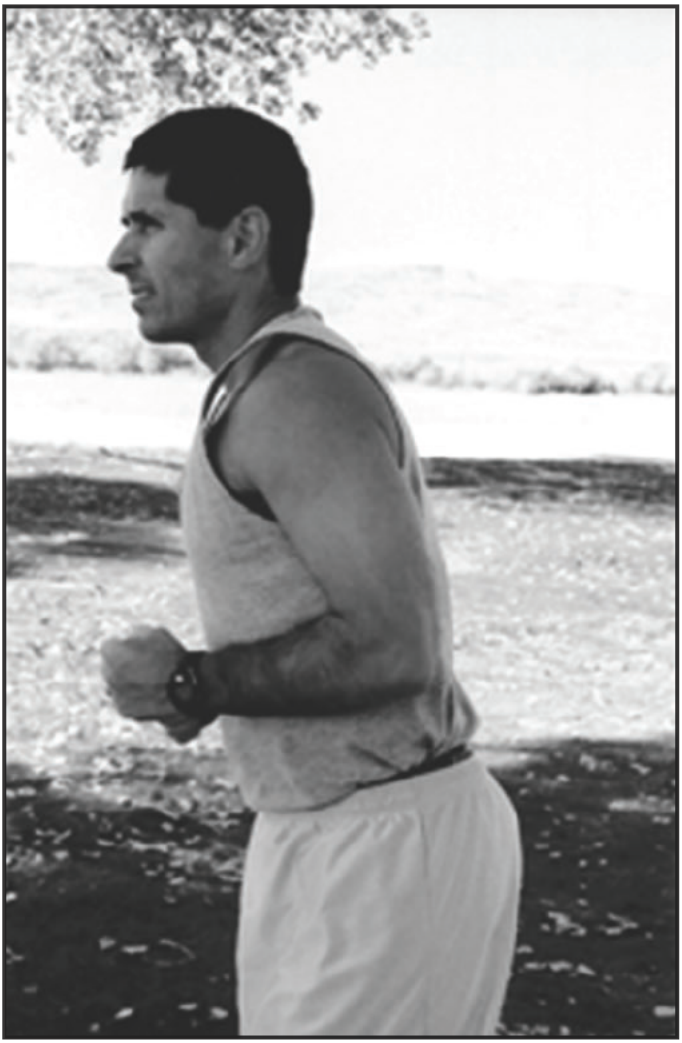
though I've never tripped over the rocks, I've seen others who have, so I'm conscious of every step. I look forward to exercising because it's one of the clearly defined ways that I gauge progress. Since making the commitment to run every day back in December 2008, I've changed the goal a few times. First I was striving to reach 500 miles. That became 1,000 miles. Then 5,000 miles. Now I'm striving to exercise every day until my release.

As I take my first steps this morning, I am at 4,877 miles. If I run 65 miles this week and next week, I anticipate that I'll reach 5,000 miles in about two weeks. That is a significant milestone for me because I calculate the distance as being halfway to 10,000 miles and by the time I reach 10,000 miles I should be home or within striking distance of release.

Gravel crunches under my feet but the ear plugs I wear muffle the sound. I prefer to run without the ear plugs, but as I round the first turn I come upon Jerome and I'm reminded of why I need them. Jerome runs several times each week. He runs with Pete and they either argue about sports or sing while they run. As I approach them this morning, I hear music blasting from their headphones. Both Jerome and Pete sing, hollering the lyrics.

The bright orange ear plugs I wear serve another purpose besides muffling noise. The fluorescent color contrasts with my short black hair and white cotton headband. People see them easily, and they give an unmistakable sign that I'm not looking for small talk while I exercise. Running is my time to appreciate nature, the blessings of life, and as my body slices through the light morning breeze I don't feel like a prisoner at all.

Fences don't enclose us at Taft Camp. A few hundred acres of sagebrush and tall grass separate us from the



Michael Santos
Taft Prison Camp, June 201

real world. If I were so inclined I could make a dash for the highway to my right and reach it in about ten minutes. But what would be the point? I would not want to live as a fugitive, with law enforcement pursuing me for the rest of my life.

When I transferred to my first minimum-security camp, in Florence, Colorado, I was scheduled to serve nearly 10 more years. Even then I was not tempted to escape. While I was confined at the camp in Lompoc, my job required me to drive in an unescorted car on a public highway every night at midnight, but I had no intention of escaping. I feel more freedom in here as I'm running around this track than I could ever feel as a fugitive.

6:21a.m.

More people have joined me on the track now. They walk in pairs, conversing or listening to music through headphones. I weave my way around them. The track circles a soccer field, a softball field, tennis courts and a basketball court. I intend to run 10 miles, as I do every day except Friday, when I run between three and five miles.

While I'm out here, I think about the life Carole and I will lead when my sentence ends. That thought stays on my mind throughout every day. We're not young. I'm reminded of how my body has aged each time I press the lap counter on my Ironman watch. The scope of my exercise routine has changed over the years. During my 20s I was a weightlifter, always striving to increase my strength and size. I began incorporating running into my routine during my 30s. Although I continued training for strength during my 40s, running became my primary exercise. As I've aged, I've noticed that my muscles take longer to recuperate and my running pace has slowed considerably. I

don't mind at all.

No one at Taft camp pounds out more miles each week, but several prisoners run faster than I do. I never accept invitations to run in competitions, and when others try to run beside me I change directions; I'm not trying to be rude, but this is my time for planning, for thinking, for reflecting.

This morning I'm calculating how much Carole and I will have to earn each year in order to prepare ourselves for a comfortable retirement. I expected to have more money in savings by this stage of my imprisonment. Although the lawyer who represented me during my criminal trial successfully relieved me of all the ill-gotten gains my crime had generated, I am fortunate to have created numerous income opportunities throughout my imprisonment. Since Carole came into my life, writing projects alone have generated more than $200,000 in after-tax income for our family. That may not sound like much in the real world, where income opportunities abound, but I've never come across another prisoner who has generated as much income through his work while serving a lengthy prison term. It's gratifying for me, a source of validation. Still, Carole and I have used nearly all of that income to meet her expenses through nursing school and to support her while she uprooted her life to accompany me from one prison transfer to the next.

As I make loops around the track I press the lap counter on my watch, but I'm not paying attention to interval times. Instead, I'm absorbed with these mental calculations. By the end of this year, when Carole graduates, I expect that we will have between $30,000 and $40,000 in savings. If my work continues in the way I expect, and Carole contributes to our savings with her RN earnings

next year, we will conclude 2011 with $100,000 in savings. It will be a sufficient seed of savings to start our marriage together, but we will be nearly 48 by then. We won't own a home, nor will we have a retirement plan.

How much will we have to earn each year in order to prepare for retirement? That question consumes my concentration this morning as it frequently does.

Once I finish my prison sentence I do not want to suffer from financial stress. Carole and I must live beneath our means with a total commitment to building stability. As an RN, she should earn at least $60,000 a year. I have to believe that once I establish my career, I will earn at least as much as Carole earns. But will *$120,000 in income be sufficient for us to retire, or at least to slow down when we reach our 60s?* It seems so, but I expect that we'll pay about $40,000 in taxes, leaving us with $80,000. From that we may spend another $40,000 each year to meet living expenses, leaving us with only $40,000 to invest in a retirement plan. At 60 we will only have deposited $400,000 into that plan, and that will hardly be sufficient to generate a fixed income stream to support us through our advancing years. As I make these laps, I accept that I will need to work hard and generate an income well into my 70s, perhaps even into my 80s.

It is all the more reason for me to keep this commitment to exercise. I look at the men around me. I don't recognize everyone because, other than this time I spend exercising, or time I spend in the library, I rarely leave the housing unit. Many of the men walking on the track this morning arrived here in the past few weeks and they bear evidence to news stories I've read about obesity being an epidemic throughout America.

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Prisoners like to remind me that there is a lot I don't know about living in society. Some warn me that when I'm free I won't have time to exercise every day. They tell me that work will occupy all of my time. Others say that I will be tempted by women I meet and they unintentionally insult my character when they venture opinions that I will not remain faithful to my wife. They speak accurately when they say I don't know much about living in society, but what they don't know is my level of commitment to leading a values-driven, goal centered life.

When other prisoners warn of all the pressures and temptations that will confront me in society, I wonder why they disregard the discipline, the values, and the commitment by which I have lived for the past 23 years. If I have exercised consistently through every week of my imprisonment, why would I abandon that commitment upon release? If I have lived as an open book, announcing my values and goals at the start of each year, then recording my progress with an invitation for others to hold me accountable, why would I stop? What sense would it make for me to switch from living completely transparently to living a life of deception and betrayal? I understand that I will be transitioning from imprisonment to liberty, but why would I abandon the virtues that have brought meaning to my life through adversity?

Some of the prisoners who offer unsolicited advice on what I should expect in society leave me questioning their wisdom. They say that I have been away from the world for too long, and that once I return I will not maintain the discipline I rely upon now. Frankly, I don't get that. Such logic doesn't make sense to me.

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6:45 a.m.

I'm halfway through my run. I feel blessed, grateful for the good things in my life, knowing that I have many. What few other prisoners understand is that despite the decades I have served, I feel rich, happy, productive, and at peace. Those feelings have not come by accident. My path through prison has been uncommon, and privileges have come because of it. I will continue to walk the same path, even when my sentence concludes.

Early in my term, other prisoners belittled the decisions I made to focus on preparations for release. They pointed out that I had decades to serve and advised against immersing myself in education or other programs that would impose so much structure on my life. I was in prison, *doing time*, they told me. No one was going to overlook the length of my sentence, let me out early, or grant freedom—regardless of what I achieved. What they didn't understand was that I held the power to create freedom within myself, regardless of my outer surroundings.

I feel that freedom now with each stride I take around this track.

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Freedom, for me, doesn't necessarily mean release from prison. Over the years, I've known many men who served shorter sentences than mine. They served their terms in the usual, meandering way. When they re-entered society, few opportunities opened for them. It wasn't long before they reverted to crime. I met them again when they returned to prison. Getting out does not necessarily mean freedom, and the aspirations that motivate me are not rooted in release. I aspire for a meaningful life.

Decisions and commitments create an inner freedom that empowers me. It's what motivates me to begin

my work before 2:00 every morning and inspires me to exercise every day regardless of weather conditions, body aches, or where prison guards confine me. I feel it when I set clearly defined goals, then exceed them. When others tell me they've found value in my work, that my writings have helped them

in some way, I feel as if I'm part of something greater than myself, as if I'm part of the broader society, and that feeling gives me freedom.

I feel freedom when I contemplate the blessings of family. First and foremost, I have my beloved wife, Carole. Besides her, I have my mother, two sisters, a grandmother, and an extended family of friends who love and support me. My father passed away while I was in my 18th year of confinement, and my grandfather passed away in my 15th year.

With Julie (sister), Zachary (nephew), Sophia (niece), Carole (wife), and Geri (mom)

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7:15 a.m.

I run through my final four laps of the morning while I'm looking ahead 97 hours, when I expect that Carole will arrive for our Friday visit. The question I ask now, and every day, is what more can I do to show my wife how much I appreciate all that she brings to my life? She didn't commit a crime, but she willingly serves this sentence with me.

This quest to live as the best husband I can be, the best person I can become, will not end with the expiration of my sentence. The sentence is simply a part of my journey. External factors—like whether I'm in prison or not—do not define who I am. Only the decisions I make and whether those decisions harmonize with my values define who I am.

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7:20 a.m.

I'm glad to complete the next-to-last lap of the 10-mile distance I set out to run this morning. But right now I must suspend my exercise so I can go to Health Services before pill call ends at 7:30 a.m.

I hate interrupting my run before completing it, but I have some type of allergy that brings on dizziness if I don't take a yellow pill. The medical staff will not allow the commissary to sell the allergy pill, so in order to take it I have to present myself at Health Services between 7:00 and 7:30 each morning. And rules require that I wear a shirt so I pull mine over my sweaty torso.

"How was your run?" Jim asks me. He's another prisoner who walks by as I'm leaving the recreation area toward Health Services.

"Fine. Thanks for asking," I respond while walking away. I run every day so the question is equivalent to be-

ing asked how it felt to brush my teeth. I look at my watch and see that it's 7:24. I've been awake for six hours and just uttered my first words of the day.

Hundreds of men are visible on the compound now. Despite my fluorescent orange ear plugs, my sunglasses, and my determined disposition, maintaining silence will not be as easy. I cannot be rude so I nod, smile, and greet the other prisoners when appropriate. I open the door to Health Services and say good morning to the officer who sits in the lobby area. At the window I show my ID and the nurse, who recognizes me, says good morning and slides a paper cup the size of a thimble beneath the window. I remove the allergy pill, put it in my mouth, then wash it down with a sip of water from the fountain.

Before leaving the lobby I turn to the officer and hold out my hands, palms open. Then I open my mouth wide so he can look inside to confirm that I've swallowed the allergy pill. I may be 46, but being a prisoner means that I must accept the indignities that go along with it. They matter no more to me than rain matters to a fish.

When I exit the lobby to walk back toward the track, I'm mindful of the time. At 8:30 this morning I'm scheduled to attend the Toastmasters meeting, so I have less than one hour to finish my exercise. Walking quickly, I pull the tank top away from my torso but I don't take it off until I'm back in the recreation area. It's getting hotter, with the sun off the horizon and beaming from much higher in the sky. I love this climate.

As soon as I step on the track I pull my shirt off and drape it across the bleachers to dry. When I set off for my final lap of the morning, it's 7:34. Running creates a breeze against my sweaty skin, cooling me. I complete the full 10 miles in 1 hour and 32 minutes.

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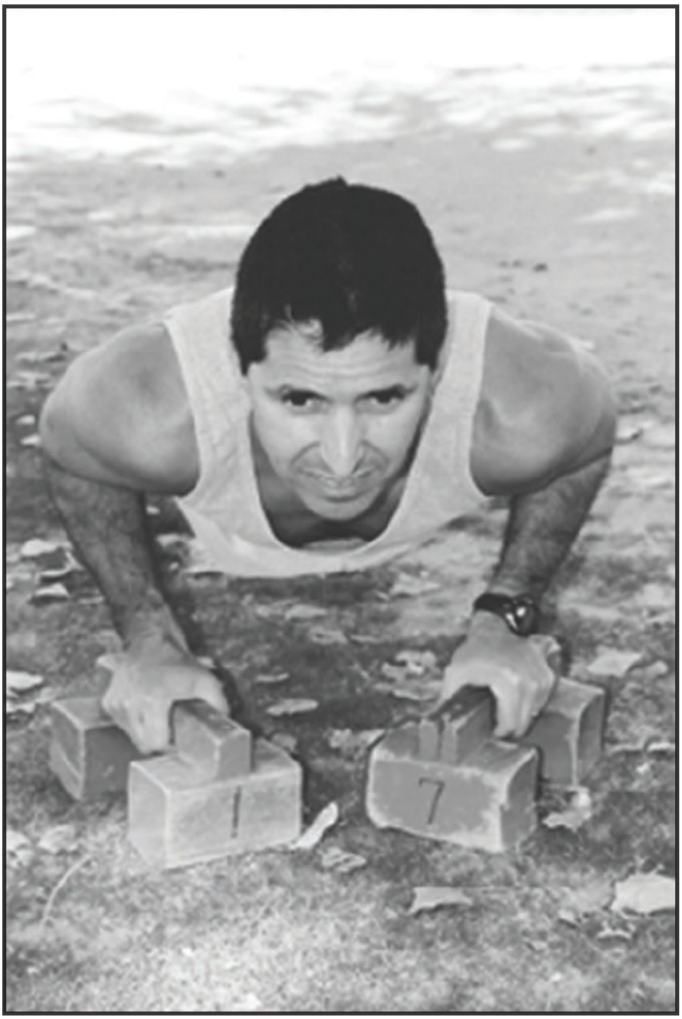
7:37 a.m.

From the track I walk to the recreation office. About 100 other prisoners are either walking, running, or using the stationary bicycles and stepping machines. We don't have weights, but many of the men work out on the pull-up or dip bars; some weigh themselves down with medicine balls by putting the balls into a gym bag and then hanging the gym bag over their shoulders while they exercise. I give my ID card to the clerk who mans the recreation office and request a set of pushup blocks.

I've been strength training with pushups since my incarceration began. What I like about pushups is that they strengthen and develop the entire upper body; a person can do pushups anywhere. There have been times during my sentence when guards have locked me in a SHU (segregated housing unit—otherwise known as "solitary") cell the size of a closet, keeping me inside for 24 hours a day for weeks at a time. I adjusted, dropping to pound out pushups and staying fit by running in place. Maintaining physical fitness keeps my spirit strong and like everything else, it requires daily attention. Exercise will be a part of my daily life for as long as I'm physically capable, and I cannot imagine outside forces that would change this perspective any more than I can imagine outside forces that would cause me to stop brushing my teeth.

Taft is the only prison I've been in that has pushup blocks. Each block is made of wood, with two platforms fastened to a crossbar that I grip. I like exercising with them because they give the chest a deep stretch, strengthening pectorals, shoulders, arms, and even the torso. I feel strong as I drop down to knock out my first set of 20 reps. Then I walk about 20 paces and I drop for my second set,



Michael Santos, Taft Camp 2010

hitting another 20 reps. The blocks keep me from making scars on my hands.

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I used to do pushups on clenched fists. That exercise strengthened my wrists as well as my torso, but Carole complained about the ugly calluses that formed on my knuckles. When I was younger and held in higher-security prisons, where violence was a daily occurrence, I kept constantly vigilant of the danger around me. Physical fitness was part of my defense mechanism, and I thought outer signs of strength might persuade predators to seek easier prey. The scars on my knuckles furthered the image of "don't mess with me" that I hoped to project. In retrospect, I realize that the scars only change perceptions. Delusions about intimidating the prisoners around me in the penitentiary were about as likely as a bunny trying to intimidate snakes in a viper pit. Although I avoided conflicts with other prisoners, I did not learn until several years had passed that inner decisions rather than outer appearances were the path to peace.

Serving time is easy for me now as I walk through this final stage of imprisonment, but I still rely upon the same strategies that powered me through the early years. I no longer live in an environment with a persistent threat of violence, but I never forget that I'm a prisoner and that a persistent threat of failure awaits me. These pushups are an integral part of my preparation.

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When I'm out here exercising I don't feel the limitations of imprisonment at all. I'm in my own world, oblivious to the men around me, keeping count of my training and conscious of advancing towards my goal, but simultaneously thinking about Carole and what else we

can do together to build our brand.

I project my thoughts into the future, five or ten years from now.

Where will I be?

How will I earn my living?

What will I do to overcome the bias I expect others to have against me?

I will never erase the stigma that accompanies my criminal conviction or the record of a quarter-century in prison. This is my adversity, but I brought it upon myself and I must meet it with dignity, with perseverance, with a commitment to make things right, or to reconcile with society. That's what I think about as I press through another set of pushups and take 20 paces around the track before dropping for another set.

I envision myself five years from now, when prison will be a part of my past: I'll stand in front of an audience and describe how discipline, commitment, and making values-based, goal-centered decisions empower me. My life will be as transparent then as it is now, and I'll use the records of my daily activities to show the importance and the necessity of daily preparation, of living with deliberate purpose. Every step I take today relates to the vision I have of the life I want to lead tomorrow.

My brand is one of personal empowerment. Imprisonment provides the context of my *message*, but my message is that regardless of the adversity, the answer is within each of us to overcome. Freedom and inner peace come from the decisions we make, from walking the path that we may know but sometimes struggle to follow. Incremental steps will advance us along the path, and measuring those steps, counting our way from one accomplishment to the next, will keep us on track.

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8:20 a.m.

By taking incremental steps around this track, dropping for pushups every 20 paces, I've added another 700 pushups toward my goal. That's it for today. An even thousand pushups would have been better, but I have a responsibility to attend the Toastmasters meeting at 8:30, so I forego the rest of my routine and skip my abdominal exercises. I'll catch up tomorrow. I pull on my shirt, return the pushup blocks, collect my ID from the clerk, and rush back to the housing unit to change.

Without enough time for a shower, I strip off my shirt and detour into the bathroom of my housing unit for a birdbath. The cold water refreshes me as I splash it on my face, over my chest, and under my arms to wash away the sweat. I wipe the dripping water off with my shirt, then use the same shirt to dry the stainless-steel counter top.

As I turn left out of the bathroom and speed toward my cubicle, I see numerous other prisoners still in their racks. Taft camp is the most laid back prison I've known. The staff members do not micromanage the men's schedules, but too many prisoners sleep away the time. I empathize with them, understanding that everyone copes with confinement in his own way, and adjustments change over time. Sometimes sleep can provide an escape from the pains that torment a man who misses his wife and children. The years have made imprisonment a normal part of my life, giving me a different perspective. I can't hibernate through it.

David, my cellmate, has already left by the time I turn into my cubicle. It's 8:27. The khaki pants and white t-shirt that Tim ironed for me hang on the hook at the entrance of my cubicle, but I don't want to wear those clothes

until I shower. Instead, I grab a folded pair of pants and t-shirt from the right side of my locker, pull the clothes on, grab a water bottle, and head out to the visiting room where our Toastmasters meeting takes place on most Monday mornings at 8:30.

Toastmasters is a public speaking group, or rather a group where those who want to participate can develop or practice their public speaking skills. I first became involved in Toastmasters in 1990, when I was held in the Atlanta penitentiary. More than 50 prisoners met in an auditorium every Sunday evening and those of us who volunteered to give speeches rehearsed all week for the presentations. I welcomed the opportunity to write, practice, and deliver speeches to an audience that could be hostile. It was excellent practice and I've taken every opportunity to polish my speaking skills further because of my experience with the Atlanta Toastmasters.

In Taft Camp our public speaking club goes by the name Toastmasters but the club doesn't have an affiliation with the national group. Between 20 and 30 men show up to participate, but only a handful take the opportunity seriously by writing the speech, then devoting at least one hour of preparation time for every minute of the speech. When I offer to deliver a speech, I practice my presentation over and over, devoting more than 10 hours for a 10-minute speech. Today I'm going to listen.

I see Bali, a friend of mine at Taft Camp, walking out of the visiting room as I walk toward it. He reminds me of Gandhi—not only because he is from India and wise, but because Bali wears wire-frame glasses that remind me of Gandhi's portrait.

Bali serves a six-month sentence at Taft Camp for an offense related to income taxes. He is assigned to my

housing unit and sits across from me at the table where I write in the afternoon. He works on his own projects and frequently offers wisdom that he has learned through a combination of experience and study under Eastern spiritual masters

"Professor," he says to me as I approach, "Toastmasters is cancelled for today."

"Oh, why is that?" I ask him, knowing that administrators routinely make changes to prison schedules.

"I don't know. Everyone is leaving. We'll meet next Monday."

I turn back toward the housing unit, not disturbed at all. I consider changing back into my exercise gear and returning to the track for the completion of my workout. But as I climb the stairs that lead into my housing unit, I decide against that idea. It's 8:31 and I can use the extra time for work.

"Are you going to the office, Professor?" Bali is very gracious, very humble. He is in his mid-50s, a successful businessman, married for longer than 35 years, the father of a medical doctor and an engineer, and he treats me with respect that I don't deserve but that I appreciate. He calls me his prison guru.

"I'll be there after a while, in about an hour," I tell him. "I have to shower and eat something first."

"Very good," he responds. "I'll hold down the fort."

Although I have the quiet room to myself during the early, predawn hours of the morning, when I return after my exercise it's open territory. I keep my books, papers, and chair at the table to reserve my position, but in reality I don't have a right to the space. It's first come, first served. My fellow prisoners give me consideration, likely because of my seniority. I don't mind sharing the space at

all. My primary concern is keeping the room quiet, but I can only depend on silence in the very early hours of the morning. Hence, my self-imposed schedule. Bali understands the value I place on quiet and I'm glad he's going to sit in the room while I shower.

Before returning to my cubicle I turn into the large television room to my right. The room has three wall-mounted televisions and several tables for games. It's a common area where prisoners congregate, but the noise level is kept down because the televisions broadcast through headphones rather than speakers.

I don't have my radio on so I won't hear anything but I'm only interested in seeing the market ticker on the CNBC screen. Earlier in my prison journey, the stock market played significantly in my adjustment. It was the late 1990s, after I had concluded my formal education programs. For three years I had the fever and was completely absorbed with market speculations. I invested (speculated) indirectly with assistance from my sister, Julie. I followed the market closely, read extensively to learn more about technical analysis, fundamental analysis, market sectors, market trends, individual companies, and so forth. With Julie, I was an early investor in Internet bellwethers like Yahoo! and America Online, and it was our good fortune that those stocks began paying off in huge multiples. In 1999 Julie paid more than $50,000 in capital-gains taxes from earnings, but the remaining money was sufficient to change my life inside.

I don't invest or speculate in the stock market now, as I can't afford the risk while Carole continues through school. When we began our romance I liquidated my stock portfolio to invest in our future, and that has been the best decision of my life. Still, even though I'm not

investing at the moment, I watch the market every day, keeping abreast of index averages and market sentiment. The Dow is at 10,201 this morning, and all the news remains focused on the massive oil spill in the Gulf. Current reports are that it's spilling more than 25,000 barrels of oil into the ocean every day, but pundits speculate that the flow of oil into the Gulf is even more robust. I shake my head after reading headlines of the disaster and I walk out of the room.

8:41 a.m.

There isn't a guard stationed in the housing unit at this time of day. Instead, we have a guard—or officer (as guards prefer to be called)—who roams around the entire camp. I refer to them as prison guards rather than correctional officers, not out of disrespect, but for accuracy. In all the years that I've served I've never seen any correcting going on, but I've seen a lot of guarding.

The guard on duty today, Mr. Smith, is a man in his 30s. He's tall, with sandy hair, an easy disposition, and a white cup that he always carries around. Mr. Smith doesn't bother anyone. I don't interact with guards too much. Perhaps that's an inevitable result of the role numerous guards have played in uprooting my life with unexpected transfers. Certainly I respect that they're following orders, doing their jobs. I'm always courteous to them, but I don't solicit conversation. When they ignore me, leaving me to work on independent projects, I'm grateful.

Besides prison guards, I'm assigned a counselor and a case manager. I have more interaction with these two women, both of whom treat me more like a man than a prisoner. They've both made it clear that if they had the discretion they would release me. But they don't. Their job responsibilities include assigning my bunk and job

assignment, approving my visiting and phone list, and coordinating classification paperwork that governs my care. I appreciate their consideration, but I'm always mindful of my place. I'm conscious that, were it necessary, they would not hesitate to lock me in segregation, impose more restrictions to separate me from my wife, or transfer me across the country without notice. All of my relationships with staff members begin with this premise.

I walk down the long narrow pathway between the cubicles on the left side of the housing dorm and when I reach the end, I turn right into my cubicle. David has cleaned the room, I notice. He is a hard working young man whom I respect because of the way he serves his time.

David is in his late 20s. Both of his parents immigrated from Mexico and they reared David with cultural values from Mexico rather than the USA, which I find strange because he was born in this country. He told me how he was ridiculed while growing up if he spoke English and that's why he speaks with a slight Mexican accent. His preference is to watch Spanish TV and listen to Spanish radio stations.

He didn't grow up with much of a chance, at least not the kind of opportunities that a spoiled kid like me took for granted. No one emphasized the importance of education in his household, and selling drugs wasn't considered a bad way to earn a living. David dropped out of school early, fell in love with a girl from high school, fathered two children, and sold drugs to support the family. He received an 11-year sentence.

What I respect about David is that he doesn't cry about his sentence. Instead, he works to the best of his ability to make the most of it and I'm eager to help him. We met soon after I arrived at Taft Camp. When he

Michael Santos with David Muniz
Taft Camp 2009

told me his story I was touched. It reflects poorly on our country that prisoners serve lengthy sentences for nonviolent crimes, despite their growing up in socioeconomic circumstances that almost conditioned them for failure. Since David grew up in a household that discouraged education but celebrated drug dealers, it was inevitable that he would make the decisions he did.

I encourage David every day. Since I moved into the cubicle with him he has been studying. He has earned his GED and he is now studying towards a college degree. Besides school work, David has a full-time job at the camp repairing wheelchairs for the needy. He earns extra income by cleaning cubicles, washing sneakers, and doing laundry. I'm grateful for opportunities to help David in every way I'm able because I respect his work ethic. He is humble, kind, and striving to build a better life for his wife and children.

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8:50 a.m.

I switch from sneakers to shower shoes and I reach into my locker to grab the clear plastic bag that hangs on a hook in the right, vertical compartment. The bag contains my soap, shampoo, shaving cream, razor, deodorant, and lotion. I grab my towel and walk back toward the community bathroom area near the front of the dormitory. It includes a huge shower area, with eight showers on each facing wall for a total of 16 showers. Swinging barn-like doors between knee-and-chest height provide a semblance of privacy.

The unwritten rule is that prisoners only use the eight showers on the right-side wall. To use the showers on the left-side wall would put one man directly in front of another man who showers across from him.

"What's the big deal," a new prisoner asks me about the shower rule while we wait in line. He doesn't understand why we're waiting in a line when the showers on the left are open. "We're all men here."

"You've been here one week," I remind him. "Some men have been here for years. It's probably best to understand the customs first before you try to tell others a better way."

"I don't see the big deal."

"You will in time," I tell him.

"But the showers have doors on them," he says.

"Half doors."

"Still, it's not like we're standing in the open."

"To you it's just getting wet," I try to spell out the issue for him. "For others it's as close to privacy as they get, the only place for a man to be by himself. Some men—like me—don't want to be looking across directly at another naked man while he's showering."

"That's what the doors are for," he grumbles.

"Suit yourself pal. But you might find it easier to get along in here if you respect the ways of the community."

My turn comes up and I walk toward the open shower, stall number 12. To emphasize that I don't want anyone showering in front of me, I hang my clothes on the door of the shower stall directly across the way. When I turn the lever of my shower to the right, the plastic spigot shoots a powerful stream of hot water. I adjust the nozzle to a spray. The hot water rinses the sweat and salt from my pores, refreshes my muscles, relaxes my mind, and relieves the stress that I have carried for decades. I raise my hands to massage my scalp, lean my neck back to savor the water's flow.

What will it be like to shower at home?

I think of Carole, of showering with her. No woman has touched my body, and I have not touched a woman's body in 23 years. Hot water pounding on my skin always brings these thoughts. A bath would soothe me. I haven't submerged my body in water since 1987. I don't remember what a bath feels like, but I'd like to take one with Carole, with bubbles, fragrant water, and whirlpools like I've seen in advertisements. Images in my mind take me away from here, but then I come back and realize that I'm alone, that I'm always alone—even with the hundreds of prisoners around me.

I lather up and rinse off the soap. I shave my face in the shower without a mirror, dry off, wrap the towel around me, gather my belongings and ignore the men I pass as I walk out of the bathroom, turning left in the direction of my cubicle. It's a good day, another day closer to home.

9:08 a.m.

Before dressing, I grab my radio and put the ear buds in so I can listen to the opening monologue of Rush Limbaugh. I've been listening to his radio program for more than 20 years, not because I agree with him but because his rants make me laugh. The second I tune in this morning, however, I hear the voice of a guest host. I'm not interested and turn the radio off, pulling the ear buds.

Tim did a fine job of ironing my clothes, I see. After removing the hanger from the hook on my cube's back wall, I pull off the white t-shirt and then the khaki pants, slowly to preserve the sharp crease, and lay the garments on my mattress. The clothes may be prison-issue but they're all I have and I try to keep them neat in order to present myself well throughout the day. I never know

who I'm going to meet or what opportunity will open, but I always want to make a good impression. I put the empty hanger inside my locker because rules prohibit me from leaving anything outside of my locker when I'm not in the cubicle. Then I dress.

It's 9:10, the time when I decide what I'm going to eat. My chair is directly in front of my locker and I sit, looking inside, deliberating. This is a ritual I go through every day. For many reasons, I prefer to eat here, alone, rather than in the chow hall. I'm blessed to have the option.

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I began the practice of eating alone much earlier in my sentence. It was part of my conflict-avoidance strategy. High-security penitentiaries are volatile spots, with frequent eruptions in the chow hall, a place where several hundred prisoners gather at once. It's both tribal and racial, with seating areas and serving lines assigned by groups. Rather than being one group of "prisoners," the men identified as being part of specific gangs, or being from specific geographic locations, or being of a specific ethnic group. A member of one clique was accountable for every other member of the clique. I walked alone, focusing on my own path and doing my best not to interfere with the path that others were on. Fortunate to have resources that would allow me to survive on food I could purchase from the commissary, I became accustomed to eating alone, and as my resources increased, I ate better food.

When my security level dropped, so too did the volatility of my surroundings. In medium-security prisons, violence (stabbings and bludgeoning) was less frequent, occurring monthly rather than weekly as it did

in high-security places. In low-security the violence was even less prevalent, with serious disturbances being rare. Corporate office parks or postal offices may have more volatility than prison camps, but I still prefer to eat alone and avoid the chow hall.

Besides being crowd-averse, I also grow annoyed with line-cutting. If I do go to the chow hall, I like to carry a news magazine with me. That way I read while waiting in line and simultaneously block the anger that would upset me if I were to see scores of men cutting in line. I've never cut in line because doing so would offend every person behind me and it would not be consistent with the type of character that I want to build. The less frequently I expose myself to the chow hall, the less exposure I have to conflict or disturbances.

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As I sit in front of my locker this morning, I'm indecisive about what I want to eat. In a knit bag that hangs in the right vertical compartment I have apples, bananas, onion, tomatoes, green peppers, and lemons. In the middle compartment on the left side, I see bags of dehydrated beans, precooked rice, angel-hair pasta, tomato sauce, tabouli, and tuna. I have a bag of raw almonds, raisin bran, rolled oats and granola. I also see garlic and olive oil.

I can stare at this food for another hour, but looking at it won't feed me. The question comes down to how much preparation I want to do. I have writing projects to complete, making me reluctant to waste time cooking a hot meal. Instead, I pull a bowl from the bottom compartment and I pour rolled oats inside, then I sprinkle some granola on top. I count out 12 raw almonds and bury them in the cereal. Then I walk to the bathroom and I cover the cereal with hot water.

When I return to my cube I set the bowl on top of David's locker. While the cereal absorbs the water, I use the steel table that's mounted against the wall beside David's locker to cut an apple into cubes and to slice a banana. The steel table is only 12 inches deep, so it's too narrow to write on comfortably—otherwise I'd spend all of my time in this cubicle, happily working in relative privacy with a windowless concrete wall directly in front of me. Instead, I only use the table for preparing meals.

Cutting the fruit takes more time than it should because all I have is a plastic knife. It's hard plastic, but it's still plastic and rather dull. We don't have access to real knives in prison for safety reasons. I will have to get used to eating with metal spoons, forks, and knives when I'm released, because I haven't used anything besides plastic since I've been a prisoner. I'm used to it. Some prisoners overcome the cutting problem by breaking apart shaving razors and pulling out the tiny blades. I would never consider that kind of rule-breaking because—although the razor would cut through an apple easier—a guard would charge me with possession of a weapon if he caught me. For me to consider breaking a prison rule, I need a better reason—like making life better for my family.

When I finish cutting the apple it's 9:35. Late! I pour the fruit into the bowl of hot cereal, wipe up the mess I made, then return to the chair in front of my locker and sit. The dormitory is quiet, especially here in the back, and I appreciate the solitude while I eat my meal in peace.

The double doors of my locker are open and I stare at the pictures of Carole that are in front of me. Ninety-five more hours until we visit. My hopes are that she's typing some of the manuscript pages I've sent, updating my blog, or improving my Facebook and Internet pres-

ence. The workload I create is too much for her to keep up with on her own, and I've asked her to tap into our support network to find volunteer typists. I hope she has secured assistance because I expect to send her several hundred handwritten pages that I will need typed before she returns to school in two months. I'll call her when I finish my cereal.

9:40 a.m.

I focus on the calendar above her picture. Six and a half more months in 2010. *What will I accomplish, and when?* The *White Collar* manuscript is not a priority. I'll continue collecting content, writing another three or four profiles by year's end. Before Carole returns to school I'll finish a manuscript I'm writing specifically for young prisoners and at-risk adolescents.

I participate in a youth outreach program here at Taft and through the program I've spoken with hundreds of at-risk adolescents. Many are under the control of the criminal justice system already, sleeping in detention centers or committed to reform-type schools. The book I'm writing for them will describe strategies I've relied upon to overcome adversity and profile other prisoners I know who use those strategies. I'm calling the book *Success! The Straight-A Guide*, and as I contemplate the calendar, I'm convinced that I can have the project ready to bring to market by the fall of this year.

I finish my bowl of cereal and fruit, then set the bowl beside me on the concrete floor while I continue contemplating how I'll spend the rest of this year. If I finish writing the content for the at-risk kids this summer, I can generate the resources to self-publish in September. I'll reserve time in October, November, and December for raising sponsorship funds that will allow me to distribute

the books—free-of-charge—to schools, juvenile detention centers, and other institutions or organizations that can use the books as a resource.

It's 9:50 and I only have about a half hour before the count. I put the bowl in my locker—unwashed, because I don't want to take the time to walk to the bathroom sink and back. Instead, I push my chair in to hold the locker doors closed and walk back to where I left my writing gear earlier this morning, before my exercise.

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Before going into the room I stop by the phone area. Six telephones hang on the wall near the entrance to the dormitory, three on each wall, and they're all open. I push my access code and the buttons to dial Carole's number.

I'm only authorized to use 300 minutes of telephone time each month, so I don't use the phone to talk with anyone other than my wife. This self-imposed restriction is difficult because it prevents me from nurturing relationships with my mother, my sisters, and other people who are close to me. Some prisoners use their phone minutes to call extended family and friends, but the length of time I serve together with the preparations I'm making for release necessitate that I reserve all of my telephone access for Carole. She is my link to the world and the love of my life.

"How is the prettiest woman on earth?" I press the timer button on my watch as soon as she accepts the call.

"I miss you," she greets me.

"What have you been doing for our family today?"

"Typing your blogs."

"Did the mail come yet?"

"I received a letter from you, two blogs, and seven

more pages for the book."

"Excellent. Do I have any messages?"

"Justin sent a message. His lawyer said that the IRS approval for the foundation should be ready by August. Several students have sent emails. One of them wrote…"

"Honey, I don't have phone minutes for the minutiae. Just send those kinds of messages. What else?"

"I talked to Carol. She sent the edits directly to you."

"How bad are they?" The Carol my wife refers to is my closest mentor and advocate. She and her family have been assisting me for longer than 12 years. I always send my manuscripts to Carol because her editing skills improve the flow and coherency of my work. Her son, Tristan, has been working hard to advance my writing career.

"You have to show more, tell less." My wife relays a writing lesson that I have been slow to learn.

"Okay. I'll brace myself. What else? Did you find volunteers to help you with the typing?"

"Yes. We'll get it done," Carole assures me.

"That's almost a minute," I'm looking at my stopwatch and see I'm past 40 seconds. "I love you and I'll call you after lunch."

I disconnect the call at 57 seconds and reset my chronometer while I walk to the quiet room.

"I've been manning the office for you, Professor." My friend Bali greets me by bowing his head and bringing his open hands together when I walk into the room. "You're late. Where have you been?"

"I had to shower, eat, and I called my wife."

"How is Carole?"

"She's wonderful."

"Good. Will she be visiting this weekend?"

"I'm counting on it."

"How many phone minutes do you have left?"

I shake my head in disappointment. "It's bad. I used too many minutes yesterday. We have more than two weeks left in the month and I only have 107 minutes left. How many do you have?" I ask.

"Very good!" He smiles. "I have 168 minutes still and I've already called once this morning."

I sit at the round table across from Bali, my back to the wall, the window to my left. I look outside. The sun shines brightly and the blue sky reminds me that I'm another summer closer to release. I see a mountain range about 10 miles in the distance, and inside the courtyard that is immediately outside the window I admire a palm tree, the closely cropped lawn, and the well kept walkways.

"The grass used to be so green here," I tell Bali. "They don't seem to be watering it anymore."

"That's the new rule," Bali says. "The sergeant says we cannot water the lawns anymore because we must conserve water. I cannot even use the pipes any more to water my roses."

Bali has a job assignment of maintaining the gardens in front of the housing unit.

"What pipes?" I don't understand him.

"The pipes to water."

"You mean the hoses?" I ask, smiling. "You're not allowed to water with the garden hose?"

"I must fill a bucket with water and carry it to my roses. Have you seen how nicely they are blooming?"

* * * * * * *

I'm going to miss Bali when he leaves in four months. My last friend in prison was Steve, an electrical

engineer and prominent entrepreneur who was in his 60s, serving nine months for an obscure crime related to his company's pension fund. We spent a few hours together every day during the final months of his brief sentence at Taft, but he was released last November. The probation officer who supervises Steve's release doesn't permit Steve to correspond with me directly, but Steve keeps in touch with Carole and I've heard about his progress indirectly through her. When Bali concludes his six-month sentence, I don't expect the probation officer who supervises his release will allow us to communicate.

* * * * * * *

"If I wanted to buy a home," I ask Bali, "would my long prison term be a problem?" He owns a real estate company and a mortgage company so he should know.

"Your mortgage is going to depend on factors such as your credit rating, your debt-to-income ratio, and the amount of down payment you apply to the purchase price. If you qualify in those areas, the prison term won't disqualify you."

"But I don't have a credit history."

"Don't worry," Bali tells me, "I will help you. When you're ready to buy a house, just call me."

If those kinds of assurances would appease my anxieties I'd be the luckiest person in the world. I can't purge those thoughts about how I am going to generate the income I will need to grow old without financial stress. I discuss with Bali the various ways I intend to convert my experiences into a business model that will support me.

"Don't worry." He smiles at me, a glow of serenity on his face. "You will do very well. Happy is the man whose wants are few. The fewer the wants, the happier the person. One who has no wants is the richest person."

"Then I should stay in prison."

"You're doing very well here, and you will do very well outside. I can tell from your discipline. You work much harder than anyone I know."

"I work because I want to provide for Carole in the same way that other men provide for their wives."

"Do you know the story of Alexander the Great?"

"I know what I've read," I answer. "He was a student of Aristotle and his ambition was to conquer the world."

"He may have been a student of Aristotle's, but Alexander the Great didn't learn from all the wisdom Aristotle had to offer. For one thing, Alexander never learned the lesson of balance, of moderation."

"Alexander was a king," I shrug.

"He was a man," Bali corrects me. "It wasn't until just before Alexander's death that he understood the value of life. If he had, Alexander said that he would not have wasted so many breaths in useless worries or pursuits. Before his death, Alexander directed that during his funeral procession, his hands should be kept out of his coffin with palms upwards so that the world might take a lesson from the Great Alexander, a man who had planned to conquer the world but was going away from it empty-handed."

Bali meditates two and a half hours every day, and despite building businesses with millions in revenues, he is a portrait of humility. I can learn from him, just as I learn from many of the other men with whom I serve time. I thank him for his insight, then resume my work, outlining my writing duties for the rest of the day, and recording my progress in my Day-Timer.

10:20 a.m.

I stand, letting Bali know it's time for us to return to our cubicles for the 10:30 census count that takes place every morning. I straighten my papers on the table and walk out. Scores of other prisoners gather around the front of the dormitory's lobby. While waiting for the guards to enter the housing unit, some men discuss the NBA playoffs, some watch television, and others make last-minute phone calls. It's boisterous at this time and I regret not having ear plugs with me. I weave through the crowd and walk past the bathroom towards my cubicle, passing many men along the way but avoiding conversation.

When I turn into my cubicle I see David at the desk. He has washed the empty cereal bowl I left in my locker and he stands drying it at the steel surface beside his locker that is a poor design for a desk.

"You didn't have to do that, *jefe*." I always address David as *jefe*, which translates to boss in Spanish.

"They're serving chicken nuggets for lunch," he warns me. "I know you don't like those. You want me to cook something?"

David and I share a cubicle that is smaller than the closet in the bedroom where I grew up. We understand each other's habits and routines. Our living arrangement works well because we both help each other in the ways we're able. Several times each week, David cooks meals for us, using the food from my locker.

"What do you want to eat?" he asks.

"It doesn't matter. Whatever you want me to make."

"You're the *jefe*. You decide," I tell him.

"I can make beans, rice, vegetables, and tuna," David suggests.

"We never go wrong with that. Let's do it."

When I say, "Let's do it," we both know that it's really David who does all the work. He grabs the food from my locker and then sets himself up at the desk to start preparations. It's 10:22 and I sit in the plastic chair in front of my locker, propping my feet on the steel bed post to my left as I lean back. While David works quietly cutting vegetables, I flip through the pages of my news magazines to keep abreast of world events.

The high unemployment rates I read about provide further evidence that I would be a fool to ignore. With 16 million Americans looking for work, I can't expect employers to hire me. I will have to create my own income out of the experiences I've lived. When I read about the health care industry as being the one sector providing job growth I feel grateful that Carole and I chose to invest our resources in her nursing education, and grateful to know that she graduates in six months. But that doesn't diminish the urgency I feel to create more income opportunities to help my transition from prison to life in the world.

"*Jefe,*" I ask David, "have you spoken with your wife about going back to school?"

He turns around to face me. "She's trying, but it's not easy. She has to work and she has to take care of the kids."

"Keep encouraging her. She's still very young. If she studies at home she can learn enough to pass the GED. Once she passes, she can begin classes in nursing. By the time you get out she could be a nurse and that would help your family. Nursing is one area that will always provide jobs."

"Why can't I study to be a nurse?"

"Those kinds of classes aren't available in prison. Besides, with a felony conviction you might have a hard

time getting a license. Just keep studying the basic subjects. The more math and English you study, the more opportunities will open. But keep encouraging your wife. Explain to her how much she could earn as a nurse, and tell her about the financial aid available once she passes her GED."

"I'm going to talk with her tonight."

"Good."

David resumes his concentration on cutting onions, bell peppers, and tomatoes with the plastic knife. I read on, ignoring all the noise in the housing unit. Most of the men assigned to the cubicles adjacent to ours keep the noise level down, but with 125 prisoners living in this dormitory, when we're all in our cubicles waiting for the count, the unit vibrates with noisy chatter.

10:32 a.m.

The lights flicker on and off and I look at my watch. From the front of the housing unit I hear a guard yelling "count time" and calling for quiet. The unit becomes silent in an instant and I stand by my rack continuing to read.

The census counts pass quickly. At Taft, the guards count us at 1:00 a.m., 3:00 a.m., 5:00 a.m., 10:30 a.m., 4:00 p.m., and 10:00 p.m. They require us to stand for the 10:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. count, but other than those times we may sit or lie on our racks. On occasion, the guards change the routine by ordering an unscheduled count, but it's not often.

At 10:37 the lights again flicker on and off while the guard simultaneously yells from the front of the dormitory that the count has cleared. As I move from the side of my rack to sit in the plastic chair the noise level cranks up again, ricocheting off the concrete and steel. Not everyone in prison appreciates silence as much as I do.

"I'm going to the microwave," David tells me. "Are you going to be here or in the office?"

It's not really an office where I work, but since I'm always sitting in the room with papers and books open on the surface of the round table, people in the housing unit frequently refer to it as the office. We're fortunate to have such a space. Other prisons where I've been held were too crowded and administrators reserved every available space for steel bunk beds.

I tell David that I'll continue reading in the cubicle while he prepares our lunch.

* * * * * * *

Earlier in my prison term I spent considerably more time reading than I read now. When I began, I would read between 50 and 70 books every year, and those books (almost all of them nonfiction), were in addition to the reading required for my academic program. Now that I'm moving through the final 10 percent of my imprisonment, I feel a pressure to devote more of each day to writing. The only times I reserve for reading are breaks for census counts, or just before I go to sleep.

By reading current events, I know that our nation confines more than 2.3 million people. America's prison system costs taxpayers $75 billion to operate every year, I've read. Yet few Americans really know how prisons perpetuate cycles of failure. Administrators and those who lobby for businesses receiving the billions in taxpayer funds (such as prison vendors and prison contractors) that have an interest in continuing the charade of "corrections," but as an American I have a duty to show citizens why long-term imprisonment and obliterating hope for nonviolent offenders is a misguided public policy. But, because prison reform is still "pie in the sky," I also write

to show other prisoners how discipline, commitment, and deliberate adjustment decisions can prepare them to conquer the obstacles wrought by confinement.

* * * * * * *

11:04 a.m.

David returns with a bowl of beans and a bowl of rice. The dormitory has quieted down some because the guards unlocked the doors for the men to go to the chow hall.

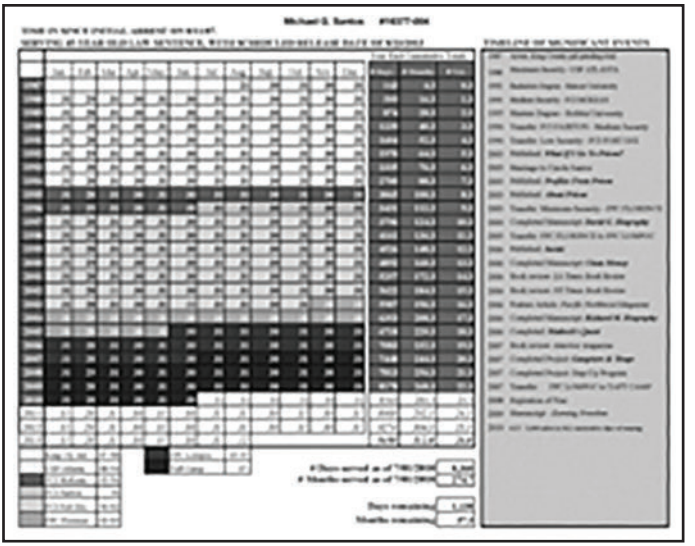
"The vegetables are mixed with the beans," David tells me as he passes a bowl with rice on one side, beans on the other. "All you have to do is add a pack of tuna."

"Thank you," I tell him as I put down the newspaper. "Lunch looks delicious."

"I'm going to the TV room." David carries his bowl out. "When you finish, just leave your bowl on the table. I'll take care of it."

David and I are compatible, respectful of each other. I feel fortunate to have such a considerate person who shares the cubicle. After opening a package of tuna and mixing it in with the rice, I add a little hot sauce. While holding the bowl with my left hand, I eat with a plastic spoon, looking at the photograph of Carole on the inside of my locker's door that is open in front of me.

Carole and I have so much to learn about each other, and those lessons will begin for us within two years—I think. Beneath her photograph I taped a graph she made for me that she titled *Calendar of Confinement*. It shows all the months that I've served, color coded to indicate security levels and institutions. She has been along with me on this journey since early in 2002, and yet we've never been together outside of a prison setting. When I walk out from these boundaries we'll experience everything together for



the first time, and I feel so blessed to have her love.

I don't know where we're going to live. We're thinking about Los Angeles, but where? With years of supervised release awaiting me, it might be wiser to return to Seattle until I finish my obligation to the criminal justice system. I don't know what's going to happen. All I know is that life is about to change in dramatic ways for both of us. Thoughts about release and beginning my life with her stay on my mind.

11:17 a.m.

I finish eating the rice, beans, and tuna, put the bowl on the table, grab my water bottle, and walk out. Before resuming my work I walk into the Spanish TV room to tell David I've left the cubicle. He assures me that he will straighten the cubicle out before he returns to his job assignment.

The quiet room is empty and I sit with the intention of making progress on the manuscript I'm writing for young offenders who are grappling with the criminal justice system. Some of my intended readers for this project may be housed in youth centers or other alternatives-to-incarceration programs, while others may be in prisons already.

My friend, Justin Paperny, has taken the initiative to launch The Michael G. Santos Foundation, a nonprofit organization that will distribute content I write to help prepare others for law-abiding lives. This new manuscript will be one of the first projects the foundation distributes.

* * * * * * *

Justin Paperny

Justin graduated from USC in 1997, then went on to build a lucrative career as a stockbroker. Ten years into his career, however, he made decisions that resulted in his being charged with violating securities laws. We met and became close friends during the year he served at Taft Camp.

While we were together I described hopes I had of using what I've learned through the decades of imprisonment to teach others. Justin offered to work with me, and upon his release he really came through by assembling the team of professionals necessary to launch the foundation. As an IRS-approved nonprofit, the foundation will solicit funding from corporations and philanthropic organizations to spread this message of self-reliance and personal responsibility that he and I are in a unique position to convey.

With sponsorship from the foundation, Justin and I will have the resources necessary to produce and distribute books—free of charge—to thousands of readers that will teach them to make decisions that will prepare them to lead contributing lives. We intend to supplement the effort by teaching courses in alternative schools for at-risk adolescents, detention centers, prisons, and other institutions—including those designed to receive people who've recently been released from prison and are trying to transition into society as law-abiding citizens. I'm grateful to have friends and sponsors who actively participate in my efforts to contribute.

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Young offenders need hope. Despite individual circumstances that put them in the grips of the criminal justice system, they need examples to show them that they have the power within to make positive changes and bring

meaning to their lives. Those readers may identify with my story because I began serving a lengthy prison term during my early 20s. In the manuscript I'm working on now, I'm striving to show those readers the strategies I use to empower and enrich my life. I'm calling the manuscript *Success! The Straight-A Guide*.

Each of the "As" in the Straight-A Guide represents a word I use to show readers a comprehensive strategy that—if followed—leads to success. I believe in the strategy because it works for me, and I show my belief by following it every day.

Although I didn't refer to the strategy as the *Straight-A Guide* in the early stages of my term, I've been relying upon it since the beginning. I don't delude myself with assumptions that I'm breaking new ground. It isn't a secret and I don't think anyone can lay a legitimate claim to ownership of the strategy. Perhaps everyone knows the path to success. But it's one thing to know the way and it's another thing to walk the way. Those who achieve what they set out to achieve—wherever they are—seem to abide by it. By calling it *The Straight-A Guide*, all I do is attach memorable words to the strategy that will help me introduce and teach it to others.

I learn from observing. In prison I see numerous men adjust in ways to distinguish themselves. Some choose negative adjustments, some choose positive adjustments, and some meander along, going positive one day and negative the next. For example, some men want to be perceived as being fearless, or being super criminals, and so they act accordingly. Others want to impress staff members so they participate in programs in pursuit of certificates that have minimal meaning beyond prison boundaries. Misdirected prisoners pursue certificates one

day and fight for space in a television room or cut in lines the next.

My objective is to succeed upon release. I don't care about a prison reputation and I'm indifferent to staff perceptions. The pursuit of success upon release drives my every decision, and that has been the case since the beginning of my term.

All leaders follow this same strategy of taking clearly defined steps toward a well articulated goal. By reading about individuals who achieve—people who become the best in the world at what they do—I've become convinced that success isn't random and it doesn't come by accident. People who commit to success make deliberate choices and the level of success they achieve relates directly to their choices. Those pursuing success know where they stand and they know where they want to go. They understand their strengths and weaknesses. They perceive both opportunities and threats. All of that knowledge gives direction with the understanding that two points exist: start and finish. Successful people want to cross from one point to another, and they take every step accordingly, measuring incremental progress along the way.

People who achieve greatness in any domain all follow the same strategy: deliberate purpose. Bill Gates said that he envisioned a computer on every desktop and in every home. His pursuit of that goal became the spirit that drove Microsoft. Jack Welch, the former chairman of General Electric, said his business decisions began with the premise that all GE businesses had to be number one or number two in the market or he would exit the business.

It's not only business leaders who adhere to this strategy of deliberate purpose. Elite athletes and musi-

cians commit to excellence by practicing their craft every day. If they miss a single day of practice they can tell the difference. If they miss two days of practice critics can tell the difference. If they miss three days of practice fans can tell the difference. Everyone who achieves high levels of success follows a deliberate strategy, and I learn from studying them.

Prisoners, and others who struggle with adversities that make them feel like prisoners, may appreciate a guide from someone who walks the path every day.

The prison environment frequently extinguishes hope. Although numerous stories describe the difficulty and failure that awaits many upon release, scant literature is available to show examples of success after prison and how those who do succeed prepare for it.

Too many men who surrender years or decades to the system live with misperceptions that they're only serving time and that there isn't anything they can do about it. I'm writing *Success! The Straight-A Guide* to show them that despite an institutional mantra that pounds prisoners with the reverberating negative message "You've got nothin' comin'," it is possible to make deliberate choices that lead to success. Such an adjustment strategy has made all the difference in my life, despite the 22 years, 10 months and four days that I've been in prison thus far. I'll continue following *The Straight-A Guide* for the final three years, one month, and 29 days, I'm scheduled to serve, and for the rest of my life thereafter.

Writing a self-help manuscript doesn't come easily to me. In fact, none of my writing skills have come easily. My writing skills were poor when I began serving my term. Despite the two degrees I earned, I never had the privilege of studying writing in a classroom with a profes-

sor and other writing students around me.

But many mentors have helped me through correspondence.

During my late-morning and early afternoon writing session yesterday I wrote about attitude. Attitude represents the first "A" of *The Straight-A Guide*. In writing about attitude, I try to show my readers why all success begins with an *attitude* of success. Anyone can say he wants to succeed, and in my experience, every prisoner does say that he wants to succeed. But statistics show that seven of every ten people who leave prison fail.

Those who do succeed make different decisions from those who never get beyond saying they want to succeed. Those who succeed have an attitude of self-reliance. It doesn't mean they don't have help along the way, but they always work to help themselves. They recognize that they can't count on outside forces to usher in success for them. In fact, outside forces may present obstacles, but the right attitude helps them make the right decisions—decisions that advance them incrementally toward the goals they want to achieve.

Today I'm writing about the second "A" of The *Straight-A Guide*: Aspire. Those striving to succeed aspire to something meaningful. They have clear ideas of what they want and they can envision themselves achieving those aspirations. Aspirations provide the reasons for all the commitments they make, the work they invest, and the pursuit provides meaning for their lives. People who succeed do not set vague aspirations. Instead, they know exactly what they're after because clearly-defined aspirations gives them the point toward which they strive.

People who achieve don't simply say they're going to be very successful. That's the type of fuzzy statement

that has no meaning, and it's typical of people who "say" but never "do." Those who achieve clearly define their aspirations. Bill Gates, for example, is famous for aspiring to put a computer on every desktop and a computer in every house. He didn't aspire to build a successful computer company. Jack Welch aspired to ensure all GE businesses held the number one or number two positions in the marketplace. He didn't aspire to ensure all GE businesses were successful. Success requires more than vague statements that cannot be measured.

To further illustrate my interpretation of what it means to aspire, I am writing about the aspirations that guided my decisions throughout my term. I aspired to succeed upon release, but such a vague aspiration wouldn't sustain my focus through a quarter century of prison. What did success mean? I had to define it. Primarily, success meant positioning myself to ensure I would have the skills, resources, support network, and fitness to emerge as a contributing citizen. Still not specific enough. What did skills, resources, support network, and fitness mean? I had to define each.

Skills: Skills meant I had to educate myself and earn academic credentials people in society would respect. I had a clearly-defined aspiration to earn an undergraduate degree and a graduate degree during my first decade of imprisonment.

Resources: I aspired to ensure that when I concluded my prison term I would have enough money in the bank to meet all of my expenses during my first year of liberty.

Support network: I aspired to earn respect, trust, and support from at least 10 law-abiding citizens who would define my transition into society when I concluded

my sentence.

Fitness level: I aspired to keep my weight within a ten-pound range throughout my prison term, within five pounds higher or lower than my high school graduation weight of 172.

In pursuing those clearly-defined aspirations I had meaning in my life—a reason for every decision I made, and a guide I could consult to make the right decisions. All decisions would work together to advance me incrementally toward my aspirations. Achieving those aspirations, I believed, would put me in a much stronger position to succeed upon release as I defined success.

When I finish writing the section on aspiration, I will write about the third "A" of *The Straight-A Guide*: Act. That section describes how aspirations lead to actions. Following actions I will write about awareness, then accountability, then achievement, and finally, appreciation.

I began this manuscript with a goal of writing 25 pages every week. By adhering to that schedule, my outline suggests that I can complete the manuscript well before the end of August, with between 140 and 160 pages. The schedule pushes me to write at least four pages every day, but I'm not going to reach that goal today.

* * * * * * *

12:45 p.m.

Three other prisoners join me in the quiet room to work on their own study programs. The room is no longer quiet and ear plugs won't block their conversation.

The three men are teaching themselves how to make money by trading commodities. They use financial pages of business newspapers to learn price movements from the previous trading days for commodities like sugar, coffee, grain, pork bellies, and so forth. With graph pa-

per, the men create their own charts and try to decipher patterns that might predict precise moments when they should buy or sell positions in future trades.

The technical analysis may lack the precision and speed that powerful computers can provide, but it fuels fantasies of easy riches for the men. As I try to write, they're distracting me with discussions of how trades they make will generate an easy and safe $500 every day when they're released because they've devised a system. I've seen so many "systems" devised to earn easy money that I've become more cynical than most. One prisoner had a system that guaranteed a 30 percent return by sports betting. Another prisoner had a system to win at Blackjack and other card games. I contemplate opening a discussion with the men, but I've learned that it's best not to proffer unsolicited opinions or advice in prison. That way I can spare myself the inevitable arguments that follow as egos interfere—including mine.

I look at my watch and think of what else I can do. It's almost 1:00 p.m., so I straighten out my writing gear and then walk out. I'm going to the law library. On my way out, I stop by the phone area and dial Carole's number.

"Do you have any messages for the man who loves you?" I ask her when she activates our call. I express my devotion to Carole at every opportunity.

"Hi, Baby."

"We have three minutes to talk."

"Wow! So generous." Carole teases.

"We're behind schedule, Honey. It's only the 14th. We have more than two weeks left in the month and not enough phone minutes to make it through if we talk longer. Tick tock. Any messages for me?"

"I have a message from Joan. She invited me for

coffee when I'm in Santa Barbara."

I feel a surge of joy, boosting my self-esteem. Carole is referring to Joan Petersilia, a distinguished professor of law at Stanford Law School and one of American's foremost scholars on prisoners' reentry. She extended me the honor of an invitation to contribute a chapter to a book she is bringing to market later this year, the *Oxford Handbook on Sentencing and Corrections*. She also has invited me to speak at Stanford University upon my release. I'm enthusiastic about opportunities to both strengthen my relationship with her and to prove worthy of her sponsorship.

"That's wonderful! When are you going?"

"I sent her my schedule, so I'm waiting to hear back."

"When you see her, make sure you describe the new manuscripts I'm working on. And let her know that I'd like to contribute to more of her projects."

"Honey, I know. I'm not new at this. When I meet with her, I'll fill her in on everything."

"Thank you. I know you're taking care of everything, and I appreciate it. What else? Any other messages?"

"I miss you. Does that count as a message?"

Carole and I burn through two more minutes discussing her day and I tell her what I'm working on. When I disconnect the call, I see on my watch that we used four minutes of our phone time, falling further behind.

1:04 p.m.

I push the door open to walk to the library, and a wave of heat reminds me I'm in a Southern California desert in the summer. I walk across a wide concrete pathway that leads to the library. Up ahead I see Eric. He's finishing

an 18-month sentence for his plea of guilty to defrauding investors out of nearly $2 million. Standing by Eric's side is another prisoner, one I haven't seen before. The other man wears blue canvas, slip-on shoes—a tell-tale sign that he recently arrived at Taft. Both men watch as I approach. They're waiting to talk to me.

"Michael," Eric says, "Mark just arrived last week. He read some of your Web site writings before he self-surrendered and he wanted to meet you."

I shake both men's hands. "I hope you found the writings helpful, that they eased your anxieties some."

"They really did," Mark says. "I've never been to prison before and everyone in my family was worried. Your writings let us know what to expect and I appreciated the insight."

"You were fortunate that the BOP sent you to Taft. Some camps might be as laid back as Taft, but I can't imagine any being better."

Eric nods in agreement, as I speak.

"I told him the time passes easily here," Eric says. "It feels like I just got here, but a year has gone by and I'll be out in one more month."

"My lawyer was telling me that I should request Lompoc Camp, and I was set to make the request," Mark said. "When I read your work, I changed my mind and requested Taft."

"I served two years at Lompoc Camp. While I was there, I thought Lompoc was the easiest camp in the world. That was until I transferred to Taft. The truth is, Mark, prison is what you make of it. Whether you served time at Lompoc, Taft, or any other prison—even if it's higher security—the perceptions you bring in with you determine the adjustment. I'm sure you'll be fine. How long are you

going to be with us?"

"I told him not to mention sentence lengths to you," Eric says. "He thinks the judge really slammed him but it's nothing compared to yours."

"That's not true. I don't compare my sentence with anyone else's because I know every man's sentence is traumatic. Before I came to prison, the thought of serving one month in prison would have traumatized me. It doesn't matter how long a sentence is. Being separated from family and community brings a terrible inner suffering—not only for the prisoner but for the family as well. I know these first days are the most difficult, but they'll pass. One day leads to the next, and then another. Soon you'll have a week in. Then a month is gone. Pretty soon you'll be counting seasons."

"I appreciate that," Mark says. "I was sentenced to three years and it feels like the end of the world. Isn't there anything I can do to go home sooner?"

"Do you have a history of substance abuse of any kind?"

"He's white collar," Eric answers for him. "No drugs involved. Mark is an accountant."

"That doesn't matter. I didn't ask whether he was convicted of a drug offense." I turn back to Mark. "Do you have a documented history of substance abuse? Did you ever smoke weed or did you drink too much?"

Mark looks to be in his mid-40s. "Well, yeah, I've done both. But I don't have a drug problem or a drinking problem."

"So when you met with the probation officer for your PSI, did you mention anything about smoking pot or drinking?" I ask about the Presentence Investigation Report that a probation officer prepares for the judge to

consider before sentencing.

Mark shook his head no. "My lawyer said to keep that to myself. He didn't want anything about drug use on the record for sentencing."

"That's too bad," I tell Mark. "It wasn't good advice. The only way the prison system can reduce a prisoner's sentence is if the prisoner completes a 500-hour drug treatment program. But in practical terms, to qualify for the program the prisoner's PSI must document the substance abuse. If you had that documentation, the prison system could reduce your sentence by a full year and give you six months of halfway house. On a three-year sentence, you would have served only about one year in prison."

Mark looks as if he is going to cry. "But my lawyer told me not to say anything."

"That's okay." I try to soothe Mark's frustration. "You won't serve a full three years anyway. You'll receive good time as long as you stay away from disciplinary problems, and you'll receive a few months of halfway house. You'll be out of here in 27 or 28 months."

"Isn't there anything else I can do to get into that drug program?"

"At this stage it's unlikely. The prison system bases most of its decisions on the PSI. Once that's written, it determines your initial custody and classification and pretty much everything else the prison system considers. Instead of dwelling on that, it's best to focus on what you can do while you're in here to make life better for you now and for when you go home."

"But I've got two young children at home. My dad's sick. My wife needs me. It's not right that I'm here for all this time. I can't serve three years. There's got to be

something I can do."

"There is," I tell him. "You can exercise. You can read. You can grow closer to God. You can show your family that you're strong, that you love them, and that you're going to serve this sentence with courage and dignity regardless of how long you're here."

Mark is shaking his head, as if the pressure of a boulder on his back is crushing him.

I put my hand on his shoulder. "It's going to get better," I assure him. "Look at your friend Eric. When he arrived here last year he didn't know how he was going to make it through. Now he's a master of serving time, ready to go back to the city and conquer the world. The toughest part is behind you. Pressure brings perseverance and perseverance brings character. You're going to find your way. Just give it a little time and muster your courage."

"I don't know how I'm going to do it."

"You will. But you've got to excuse me now. I've got work to do. Chin up! You're going to make it through this." I shake his hand again.

"Thanks for talking with us," Eric says.

"We'll talk more later," I assure Mark as I walk away. "Why don't you join us for the Toastmaster meeting next Monday morning in the visiting room?"

He looks startled but I can tell the wheels of adjustment are already turning.

"I'll be there," he says, with just a slight hesitation.

I open the door leading into the education department, which is really only a few empty rooms for classes. I turn left down the corridor to walk toward the library. I pass by a classroom where a dozen men sit at personal computers in a self-study course for Word and Excel application programs, then pause at a bulletin board to read

what's new. Nothing I haven't read before, just clippings of newspaper articles on the need for prison reform. The articles have been up for longer than two years, but other crises in the country hold the attention of Congress. With endless wars raging on in Afghanistan and Iraq, with unemployment rates at all-time highs, with millions of people losing their homes to foreclosure, and with reports of thousands of barrels of oil pouring into the Gulf of Mexico every day, neither the President nor the Congress has an inclination to think about prison reform.

* * * * * * *

As I turn into the law library I see a recent issue of *Prison Legal News*, a newspaper that publishes judicial decisions that concern prisoners across America. I read the cover story by Paul Wright, as it provides a history of how he and other prisoners who were confined with him in the Washington State prison system founded the activist newspaper. The paper is celebrating its 20th year of continuous publication and I read that it now has 7,000 subscribers.

I remember seeing one of the early issues of *Prison Legal News*, back in the early 1990s. The magazine interested me primarily because I read that Paul Wright was locked inside the Washington state prison system when he was writing it.

Over the years, I've purchased a subscription to the newspaper a few times. I admire the work of all prisoners who work tirelessly to improve America's prison system. Paul Wright and the group he works with take a much more aggressive approach than I do, as they focus on judicial decisions and provide content that helps prisoners challenge various aspects of their confinement through the legal system. My work, on the other hand,

focuses on helping readers understand the prison system and on encouraging prisoners to adjust in ways that will prepare them for law-abiding lives upon release.

I am intimately familiar with the risk that any prisoner takes when he works to bring attention to America's prison system. Those who run this system do not want citizens to know anything about what goes on inside prison boundaries. I've been locked in "the hole" (segregation) numerous times, and administrators have uprooted my life with unexpected transfers that have taken me to prisons in four time zones as a consequence of my writing. I'm certain that Paul Wright and his colleagues at *Prison Legal News* paid a personal price with harsher terms of confinement because of their activist efforts to inspire prison reform. He is now a free man, but he continues his work to bring attention to the injustices associated with America's prison system. Reading about Paul's contributions inspires me.

As I sit on this hard chair in the library, I look at the thousands of books that surround me. Six typewriters are available for those who want to type documents for the courts, but rules threaten disciplinary action for anyone who uses the typewriters to type anything other than legal documents. They're not being used today. I would like to use them, as my productivity would increase if I had access to a typewriter. After reading the article about the history of *Prison Legal News*, I feel an urge to write. I'd like to add more literature for libraries like this, to write books that will sow seeds of hope for more prisoners and apprise more readers on why prolonged imprisonment—especially for nonviolent offenders—is a bad use of taxpayer resources.

* * * * * * *

Writing about the prison experience feels like a calling for me. I don't expect my work will bring any relief to my sentence, and with 90 percent of my imprisonment behind me, I don't care about the final 1,000-plus days that I'm still scheduled to serve. Nor do I expect to earn real-world dollar amounts because of what I write. Readers will never buy the books I write to decorate library shelves. I'm writing for a purpose, for a cause. My work contributes to the literature that documents the tragic system of American prisons. I want to provide readers with another glimpse inside, and I want to inspire prisoners to persevere despite the wretchedness of this unforgiving system that insists on extracting its pound of flesh. I want to record the hypocrisy of a system that proclaims "to prepare offenders for reentry," but then punishes men who use typewriters to nurture community support. I want to write about this system that purports to "correct" but offers no mechanism for prisoners to earn freedom, and to help American taxpayers understand why this system perpetrates high recidivism rates because of the policies it enforces. Prisons render people less likely to function in society.

But describing the prison experience for taxpayers is only part of my work. I also write to help people avoid behavior that could entangle them in problems with the criminal justice system, and I write content that prisoners may find useful as they proceed through the struggle. Such work may never bring financial success, but it helps me feel relevant.

* * * * * * *

1:37 p.m.

I walk to a shelf against the back wall in the law library and pull a random volume from the *Federal Re-*

porter series. When I lose myself to contemplation about the purpose of my life, or what challenges await me upon release, or how I'm going to earn a sufficient living to prepare for old age, I have to snap myself out of these worries with conscious action. I need tangible projects to work toward during the day, and if I'm not writing, I like to focus on activities that further my preparation for life after release. Reading the law always helps.

The Federal Reporter series publishes judicial decisions from the nation's circuit courts. The circuit courts, also known as appellate courts, review decisions from the district courts—also known as trial courts. I don't read the judicial decisions for the purpose of finding a loophole or technicality that might entitle me to advance my release date. I read judicial decisions to educate myself, to gain further insight into the society that awaits me.

* * * * * * *

It's difficult for me to comprehend the meaning of how many years have passed. The world has moved on but, for me, prison has become a way of life, basically the only life I've known as an adult. The punishment phase ended long ago, decades ago. By the time I was in my eighth year, when Hofstra awarded my master's degree, I felt as ready for release as I would ever feel. Back then I was only 31 and I could have returned to society as a contributing citizen. But my journey would require many more years of imprisonment, and in retrospect, they've all become a blur, as if I've always been a prisoner. But I haven't.

Life moves forward without me. I make the most of every day and I'm grateful for the many blessings I receive. Still, I'm conscious that an entire generation has grown up during the years I've surrendered. Both of my sisters have married and have children that I hardly know.

My grandfather and my father passed away. I've been away for all birthdays and holidays for so long that I no longer identify with what it means to celebrate such festivities. In 10 days Carole and I will celebrate our seventh wedding anniversary but our physical intimacy has thus far been limited to nothing more than a kiss under bright visiting room lights and the watchful eyes of guards.

In contemplating the time that has passed, I further my sense of urgency to prepare. But success has a different meaning for me than it does for others. For me, success means that I never return to confinement; it means that I live a contributing life; it means that I earn a reputation based on how I responded to a lengthy prison term rather than the reckless decisions I made as a younger man. Success means that I live in ways that prove me worthy of the love and support that so many people give; it means that I live as the best husband, the best American, the best human being I can be. Reading the legal decisions helps me prepare.

* * * * * * *

Since I'm not looking for anything more than general knowledge when I read legal case books, it doesn't matter which volume or series I grab. The case book I'm reading today describes decisions from the fall of 2007. I start at the first case, reading the caption first to make a quick decision of whether I should devote more time to the legal rulings. I'm particularly interested in criminal law, so I flip through pages that describe cases on immigration or civil proceedings. What I want to read about are decisions that bring people to prison—not obvious crimes like murder, robbery, or drug trafficking. Those types of crimes don't teach me much. I learn from cases that involve more esoteric actions that lead to charges and

convictions for crimes like fraud, securities violations, or tax offenses. I'm also interested in decisions that result in the revocation of supervised release because I want to understand the types of technical violations that can return a person to prison.

If I am to step back and think rationally, it seems absurd to obsess as I do about staying out once I'm released. Before I became involved in cocaine trafficking, when I was 21, I did not know a single person who had been arrested or served time in prison. No one I knew back then had to think about precautions they must take to avoid further entanglements with the criminal justice system. People lived their lives without the anxieties that I expect to shadow the rest of mine. Perceptions may change when I return to society, but for now I'm consumed with thoughts about preparations and precautions to avoid any future altercations with law enforcement.

Though perhaps irrational to those who live normal lives, my preoccupation with steps I must take to prepare for reentry has roots in reality. I don't know a single man in prison who describes plans to return after release, but countless men serve time alongside me who were released at least once before. I'm not talking about those who adhere to a criminal lifestyle. I mean educated people who once led professional careers, finished a prison term, returned to society, and then months or years later found themselves in the clutches of the criminal justice system *again*. It's my responsibility to know the risks and to ensure that I live in such a transparent way that the web of this system never traps me again. Other people may not need to consider such risks. I do.

Reading through judicial decisions confirms that judges will not tolerate those who violate conditions of

supervised release even if the person doesn't commit new criminal actions. I live alongside men who serve time for such technical violations as using credit cards without permission from their probation officers; others serve time for traveling outside of their districts without permission; others for maintaining residences that the probation officers didn't know about or approve.

By living with discipline and commitment I expect to complete my term on supervised release without complication. I don't use drugs, I will live faithfully to my wife in a stable home, and I will not associate with people who engage in criminal behavior. Neither my wife nor I drink and we don't own or use firearms. We will not struggle with financial pressures or live beyond our means. Carole and I regularly discuss the importance of transparency in our life, and she joins my commitment to live in compliance with every condition my probation officer imposes.

Despite such commitments, I feel an unnatural threat of future problems with the law hanging over me. Dreams of handcuffs sometimes torment me while I sleep. For at least the past 20 years, every dream I've had seemed to have some relationship to imprisonment. Either I'm flying away, but wondering how I'm going to return without anyone noticing; I'm shopping for items I crave, but wondering how I can carry them back into prison with me; I'm trying to convince someone I'm not a criminal, but he tells me people who aren't truly bad don't have long prison histories. The worst dreams are those that have law enforcement officials interrogating me, not believing me.

1:52 p.m.

Since my work assignment begins at 2:00 p.m., I push the chair back, stand, and return the case book to the shelf in the law library. A dozen people read or study

quietly in here, each of us in our world. I grab a stack of white typing paper to bring back with me and head toward the door.

"Where are you going?" The question stops me in mid-step. I pause to look at the library clerk. He's relatively new at Taft camp and we've never spoken before.

"Excuse me?" I look at him.

"You can't take the typing paper."

"Why's that?" I'm annoyed by prisoners who take on the role of staff.

"The typing paper is only for legal work."

"Who are you, the typewriter police?"

"No. I'm the law librarian. The sign says typewriters are only for legal work."

"I'm not using a typewriter. I'm taking typing paper."

"But the paper is to be used here, for people typing legal work." He persists with his objections.

"There isn't any shortage of typing paper, my friend."

"Still, the rules are the rules."

"Tell you what. I'm taking the typing paper. If you feel the need, go ahead and report me, I won't mind. My name is Michael Santos, and I'm in D-unit."

The inmate shakes his head as I walk out. I'm upset by the hassle. Perhaps I should be more polite in these exchanges, but I resent interferences in my life when they come from people serving time alongside me. I have much to learn from my friend Bali, who is a portrait of humility. For now I just shake off the frustration, understanding the thought process. Men such as the "librarian" come to prison in denial, with a fierce determination to show others that they're not criminals—like everyone else. They're

sure that they don't belong in prison, but the men around them do.

The time I've served has kept me in close proximity with every type of prisoner and, by learning how to read them, I've navigated my way around problems. In high security I showered in open rooms with murderers and rapists. In medium and low security I ate meals at tables beside gang members and other thugs. In camps I'm with numerous people who feel strongly that they have something to teach about the principles of good conduct. Today I'm not inclined to listen and I walk out of the library with my stack of typing paper that I will write on when I wake at one o'clock tomorrow morning.

I'm fortunate to have a job assignment that suits me. I work as an orderly in the housing unit and my job is to tidy two rooms—both the size of a bedroom. One is a room where men come together to watch Spanish television stations, and the other is the adjacent quiet room where I spend so much time writing every day.

My job is ideal because writing requires time, concentration, and solitude. As a prisoner I have each in abundance, but not all jobs would give me the liberty to set my own schedule, and some would require me to work in distracting conditions. My counselor encourages the writing and commitment I make to preparing for release. Since she is in charge of the dorm's orderlies she has the authority to assign the job of my choice. She's been a blessing to me because not all counselors would accommodate my request for a job that essentially left me alone—and being left alone is the best I can hope for.

1:58 p.m.

My shift begins at 2:00 p.m. and I look at my watch when I open the door to my housing unit. From the sup-

ply closet I grab a dusting broom and carry it to the Spanish TV room where Fernando Vasquez, another prisoner, sits watching a baseball game. He's a kind man in his late thirties, a father and husband who misses his family as he struggles with the challenges of beginning a sentence that will keep him confined for several years.

"Time for work?" Fernando smiles, making sport of my minimal duties. A job like the one I have wouldn't suit Fernando. He's a new prisoner, and for him free time is like dead time. Jobs help his hours, days, and weeks move along, and he's always willing to assist others.

"You know me," I start stacking the plastic chairs, "I'm always on time for the guards to see me working."

"I'll help you." He joins me in stacking the empty chairs so I can sweep the room. Working together, the job takes less than 30 seconds. It takes me another 30 seconds to sweep. I thank Fernando, and push the broom down the hall and into the adjacent quiet room.

"Hey, Buddy," Mike McCreedy greets me as I walk in. He surrendered to the camp only a month ago to begin serving a nine year sentence, and he is adjusting well.

"Good to see you writing," I tell him as I push the dust broom over the bare concrete floor. When I began my term it was rare for me to meet people who served sentences as long as mine. Now I routinely meet people who have more time remaining to serve than I do. Strangely, our comparative release dates remind me of how close I am, but also elicit empathy for others.

"Look at this," he holds up his blue Bic pen so I can see the clear plastic casing. "It's almost empty."

"Keep at it and you'll empty the ink out of more pens than you can count. Did you enroll in school yet?" Mike is about my age, and he told me that when he com-

pletes his term he would like to pursue a career in counseling.

"I filled out the papers. Now I'm just waiting for the books to arrive."

"Once they come you'll see how much faster time flies for you. The key to making it through is to stay busy, to work toward goals that you set. One step at a time, but always moving closer."

"I'm on it."

I push the dust I've gathered, pick it up with a dust pan, and throw it in the trash. That's it. I've finished my work responsibilities and I return to my seat, resuming my writing while Mike works on his project at the table next to me.

Part of my writing gear includes a black vinyl folder in which I carry papers. I've taped an orange cover photo of my book *Inside: Life Behind Bars in America* on the outside of the folders to indicate the top and to identify it as mine. I tape my name to all of my belongings with expectations that others will leave my things alone. From inside the folder I pull out the article by Emily Bazelon that I found this morning in the old *New York Times Magazine*. Articles on prison reform always interest me. I'm intrigued by people who write about prisons, and curious to know why they care. I always want to connect with them, to inquire whether there might be some opportunity to contribute to their work.

Despite the enormous amount of resources that taxpayers waste to sustain the prison system, it seems to me that few citizens have an interest in learning more about what happens to people in prison.

I write a letter introducing myself to Ms. Bazelon. I don't know anything more about her than what I read in

the article, but from it I gather that she has some interest in the prison system. The article identifies her as being affiliated with the law school at Yale University, so I address it as such. Not knowing the exact street, I simply list the name of the university and write New Haven, Connecticut without a zip code, expecting the post master will find it.

Over the years I've sent thousands of these kinds of unsolicited letters out. As a prisoner, my life is akin to being adrift at sea. To feed myself, I cast a line. The more lines I cast, the more chances I have of finding food to sustain me. The letters I write to people I don't know may be discarded by the recipients, but I never stop trying. The success I've had over the years convinces me that the effort and stamp are worth the investment. Every year I've increased the depth and breadth of my support network by sending out such letters.

Some of the most distinguished professors in the world have become friends and mentors of mine. I've met journalists and lawyers who didn't know me before my arrest, but who now sponsor and endorse my efforts to earn freedom. Even law enforcement officers at the highest levels of the justice department have joined my support network because of my writing, so I continue the effort with enthusiasm.

3:05 p.m.

I finish writing the letter to Ms. Bazelon and I enclose it in an envelope with a résumé, hoping that by citing my credentials she will see that although I'm a long-term prisoner, I'm also deeply committed to reconciling with society. As I walk out of the quiet room to drop the envelope in the outgoing mail slot, a guard I don't recognize screams "mail call!" in a voice loud enough to fill the cavernous dorm. It's a time of day that every prisoner antici-

pates with hopes of news from home.

I lean against the concrete block wall near the guard's station while scores of other prisoners gather around. We're like children waiting for treats. The guard dumps the huge mail sack on his work station counter, then sorts the newspapers into one stack, the magazines into another stack, the large envelopes into one stack, and the letter-size envelopes in another. He commands the men to be quiet. Knowing that the guard will withhold mail until there is silence, the men stop the chatter and turn off their radios.

The guard begins to call names and the men step forward to retrieve their mail when called. I wait patiently. It's Monday, and since guards don't distribute mail on Saturdays, the stacks of letters are high. With roughly 300 pieces of mail to pass out, I'm hopeful that at least one envelope is for me.

He calls my name and I respond by reciting my registration number. "16377-004," I say, and he passes me a *New Yorker* magazine. Magazines keep me current with major events in the world, but I'm hoping for something more personal. My name again, this time it's *Newsweek*.

I'm flipping through pages of the news magazine, saddened by photographs of so much ugliness. Birds dripping with oil. Soldiers crawling through battlefields. Abject poverty in Haiti. The guard calls my name again. I see a large white envelope as I recite my number and I recognize the loops of my wife's handwriting. When it's in my hand I see the small rectangular sticker with her return address. Every time I read her name, Carole Santos, I feel grateful that she married me and became the center of my life.

"That's all there is, fellas." The guard's announce-

ment disburses us. The other prisoners return to their cubicles, television rooms, table games, or wherever. I walk back to the quiet room with my envelope and two magazines.

Mail room guards have used a thick band of clear tape to reseal the sliced-open envelope. I'm used to guards opening to inspect all mail before delivering it to me, but I'm annoyed when they use the thick tape to reseal it. Not wanting to walk all the way back to my cubicle for scissors, I use my Bic pen to poke holes in the tape. When I make a line of side-by-side holes, I rip through the durable adhesive.

I pull a stack of unfolded pages from the envelope. It's filled with the printed copies of responses to my writings that readers have sent by email, but on top of the stack I have a two-page letter from Carole. I bring it to my nose for a scent of her perfume, and I read of her missing me, her love for me, her eagerness to begin our life together. Our letters to each other still resemble those we wrote nine years ago, when our romance began. But I never grow tired of reading the words again. They're all I have, the source of all my hope for a better life, a life with her.

The email messages Carole forwards are from a cross-section of readers. Many are from university students who read my books as part of a course in criminal justice. Some are from family members who express concern for their loved ones in prison. Others are from men on their way to prison. Many express disbelief that I've been in prison for so long. One wants me to explain how I expect to be released in two or three years if my sentence is 45 years.

Without access to email services I don't have the resources to respond to all of the messages I receive from

readers. I'd like to respond, but doing so would require that I respond by hand, then impose on Carole to type each response for either posting or forwarding. Since I generate so much other work for her to type, I hesitate to send more. I select several that prompt topics for blogs and set them in my black folder for later.

Staff members here have announced that we'll have access to email before the end of this year. I've no idea know what the limitations or restrictions will be, but I'm hopeful that email will open more opportunities for me to connect with society.

3:35 p.m.

I stack all the email messages neatly and insert them into the envelope for storage. I accumulate these envelopes and every 10 days or so I go through the messages once again. Now it's the end of my writing day, so I gather my dictionary, my black notebook, my papers, my water bottle, and the mail I received. I walk out, passing all the men and gathered at the front of the dorm. At the rear of the unit I'll wind down in my cubicle.

I see Kenny watching me. He's wearing khaki pants and a khaki shirt, and dusty black boots, and he's holding a white plastic mug. Kenny is in his early 60s and he reminds me of an old-style convict. His hair is snow white and although thinning on top, he pulls it back in a tight ponytail. He grows a white beard and his voice sounds as if he once drank a lot of bourbon. "Can you spare some coffee?" he asks when I meet him in the narrow pathway between cubicles.

"Sure. Come back to my cube."

We turn into my cube and I set my writing gear on my rack. From the second shelf of my locker, on the left side, I pull out a plastic jar and unscrew the red cap. "Do

you have a spoon?"

Kenny shows me the spoon in his mug.

"Take what you need," I tell him. He has been in this camp longer than I have, but I don't know why he's in prison, how long he's been a prisoner, or how much time he has remaining to serve. He doesn't talk to many people, I've noticed, and he spends every day working in the garden at the back of the camp, minding his own business. He doesn't watch television, but I've noticed that he reads voraciously. A casual glimpse of him might suggest he was picked up from the hills of Appalachia for making moonshine, but the literature he reads is of the highest order: Thomas Mann, Leo Tolstoy, Vladimir Nabokov, James Joyce. I've never seen Kenny with a popular novel. It seems that only classics interest him. As he scoops his coffee from the jar, I want to ask whether he, too, has surrendered decades to prison, with only literature to keep him company. But I check my curiosity, respecting the dignity of his silence, and simply nod when he thanks me before walking out of my cubicle.

After replacing the coffee in my locker, I grab my new issue of the *New Yorker*. To unwind, I admire the cover art, then open it to read the authors who contributed to this issue. I turn each page, stopping at every cartoon with hopes that I'll find one that makes me laugh.

"Do you want me to make something for dinner?" David strolls into the cube and sits on his lower bunk to unlace his boots.

"*Como estas?*" I answer him by speaking in my broken Spanish, always making him laugh with my inappropriate verb conjugations and the poor word choices I use in conversation.

"I'm serious," he laughs. "What do you want to eat?

We don't have much time."

The guards will begin the next census count at 4:00 p.m., in only 15 minutes, and David will have to reserve a microwave if he is going to cook.

"Whatever you want, *jefe*. If you want to cook, I've got everything we need."

"I've got a softball game after the count, so I'm not eating. But I can make something for you. Do you want me to cut vegetables? I can help you."

I start singing to him in Spanish, jokingly stringing words together that mock our imprisonment, that question why we're here, that assure better times are coming. He laughs at me.

"Don't sing, please. You're hurting my ears."

I sing more.

"I'm serious. Do you want me to cook?"

David is always considerate. He knows the idiosyncrasies that characterize my life in here and in exchange for the small ways that I can make his life easier, he works with me to ease mine.

"If you don't want to eat, then I'll just have oatmeal and fruit. You don't have to cook."

"I won't eat until after the game because I don't want to play with a full stomach."

"I'll be asleep by the time you finish your game. Don't worry about it. I'll make cereal."

David lies down on his rack, with radio headphones on he pulls the pillow over his eyes to block the light and rests for a few minutes while we wait for the guards to announce the census count. I lean back in my chair, propping my feet on the steel post of the bunk bed. I exchange the magazine for my Day-Timer and I turn to today's date. While balancing the small planner on my lap,

I write down the progress I made today. I've been recording daily activities in these kinds of booklets for at least 20 years, and I look forward to reviewing them all with Carole when I'm home. They have been my compass, my tool for staying on course as the days turn into weeks, the weeks into months, the months into years, and the years into decades.

"Count time!" I hear the guard bellow from the front of the dorm.

"David," I tap his foot. "They're walking. It's time to stand."

The four-o-clock afternoon census count is the second of our regularly scheduled stand-up counts. I put on my ear buds and tune into the NPR news broadcast for the headlines while I wait for both guards to walk past the cubicle. The count only lasts for two to three minutes. When the guards flip the switch to flicker the overhead lights of the dorm, everyone has the signal that the count is clear. Men leave their cubicles, speeding up the walkways toward the bathroom, television rooms, microwaves, or telephones. While David laces his sneakers to go, I replace my radio ear buds with the foam ear plugs, and sit with my black notebook, again propping my legs on the steel post.

4:04 p.m.

I devote this time to Carole every day. Nurturing love, romance, and marriage through the limitations prisons impose requires constant effort. After nearly seven full years of marriage, that have included numerous cross-state relocations for Carole when administrators transferred me, I feel her commitment, but I never take her for granted. Carole's an exceptionally beautiful woman and although I'm only scheduled to serve another three

years, I know that my imprisonment is much harder on her than it is on me. I'm conditioned for prison. It has become the only life I know. Carole lives in the real world, though, where distractions continuously compete for her attention. Holding on to her love challenges me, as if it's essential to my life but always threatened.

Carole considers my anxieties about our marriage's stability ridiculous, but I live with different perspectives. In the world where I live, women routinely leave their men. Just last week my friend Tom told me that his wife of 20 years couldn't take the separation of imprisonment any longer and that she was filing for divorce. He was only halfway through a five year sentence. I've heard stories of similar family breakups repeatedly, and I understand.

To underestimate the threat that imprisonment inflicts on a marriage is like living in the eye of a hurricane and believing the calm skies will always prevail. I know that my wife lives in society. She cannot cloister herself in a cubicle, as I do, adjusting hours to begin the day before two o'clock each morning, ending it before most people watch the late afternoon news. I make adjustments to my life so as to limit my exposure to problems in prison, including the onslaught of images television shows broadcast of families together. I create my artificial world in a continuous effort to prepare for a life that is beyond my reach.

Carole cannot block such constant reminders of the companionship she's missing. She has never had more than my words and promises to fill her empty arms, to warm her bed. For seven years of marriage, and the years of our romance before that, I've lived with the understanding that I can never take the blessing of her love for granted. Too many prisoners have shared their heartache

by describing how, out of the blue, their wives have given the crushing news: "I've found someone," or "I can't do this anymore."

Working to hold on to Carole's love is what humanizes me. Despite assurances she gives me that she will be there to pick me up when my prison term ends, and to share the rest of my life, I still feel as if I'm under water, as if her love is the reed through which I breathe to inhale oxygen. We've been weathering the storms of imprisonment successfully for many years, but I am intimately familiar with the power of those storms, and it is my duty to take precautions that may stop them from killing what I cherish, what I need to feel whole.

4:43 p.m.

I finish writing my daily letter to Carole and I fold it together with other pages I've written today, then address the envelope for her. I eat a small bowl of Raisin Bran cereal that I've wet with room temperature water from my plastic bottle. I've been eating my cereal with water rather than milk ever since my term began for obvious reasons: prison cells don't come equipped with refrigerators. Besides, I prefer this quiet time alone, eating with the comfort of Carole's photograph that is taped to the inside door of my locker. The less time I spend amid the mix of other prisoners, the more peace I enjoy, the more time I have to think.

At 4:51 I reach into my locker and grab the clear bag that hangs with my toiletries. I leave my cubicle, walking up the corridor of the empty housing unit toward the bathroom. Most of the other prisoners have left for the chow hall, while some have gone out to the recreation fields for exercise.

I stand in front of the stainless steel mirror to brush

and floss my teeth, then wash my hands and face. The day is really over for me, one day like any other in a string of thousands. I walk out of the bathroom to call Carole, and for three minutes we connect with more promises of love. I drop my letter for her into the mail slot and return to my cubicle alone, one day closer to home.

When I climb onto my rack and stretch out, my body feels tired. The fluorescent lights burn from the steel ceiling above me and the California sun still shines through all the windows. It's just before five o'clock. From the top of David's locker, I reach over for my Bible. I conclude every day by reading a few passages as I work my way—once again—from *Genesis* to *Revelation*. Tonight I'm reading from the *Book of 2 Kings* and the reign of Hezekiah. Just as God answered Hezekiah's prayers, I feel God answering mine. After reading and setting the Bible aside, I renew my prayers for strength and the power to endure whatever comes along on this journey. I thank God for the many blessings in my life before pulling my wool stocking cap over my eyes to block the light. It's 5:20 in the afternoon. Only 87 more hours until my next visit with Carole.