

Facing Long-Term Incarceration USP Atlanta, Georgia

By Michael G. Santos
April 17, 1995

Perceptions that long-term prisoners have when beginning their sentences. Readers may contrast these cynical views of my early years in prison with the more hopeful writings of my latter years. In late 2008, I updated this article with thoughts on my advancing adjustment.

I turned twenty-four just before the judge sentenced me to forty-five years in federal prison. Although I had been held in various jails in the Seattle area for about a year as I waited for trial, this was my first trip to the penitentiary. I did not know what to expect. My mind was filled with tales of prison life. I heard many stories from the other prisoners I met during that year. And, of course, I remembered the stereotypes of prison life from such films as *Brubaker* and *Stir Crazy*. Would this be it? Would my life be reduced to a prison registration number, being counted periodically as I waited for paint to peel off prison walls and years to pass away? How can a person be left with nothing meaningful to do for forty-five years? I was thirsting for life at the same time as I was trying in my mind to untangle the web that led me to such a sentence. I would scream of injustice, but I was unsure of my ground. I read the pre-sentence report prepared by the government. It said mine was a victimless crime. Does a victimless crime really merit a forty-five year prison term? I did not know. Yet those were the questions tormenting me as I waited in the county jail.

Then, early one Saturday morning, the guards shouted at me, "Santos, pack up!" I knew neither where I was going nor how I would get there. I was expecting a visit from my parents that day, but the immediate transfer would prevent me from getting word to them. I asked another prisoner—one with whom I had developed a friendship during my time in the county jail, and one whom I would never see again—to call my father and let him know I was on my way to prison, though I knew not which one. Later I learned my destination was not Club Fed, or

one of the college-campus like prisons for which the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) is becoming known. I was a long-term prisoner, and as such my destination was the United States Penitentiary in Atlanta (USP Atlanta), one of the two oldest penitentiaries in the federal system.

The trip from Seattle to Atlanta was long. A chain wrapped around my waist, which was connected to the manacles around my wrists, and the steel cuffs around my ankles, restricted my physical movement. There was nothing to restrict my thinking.

A flood of thoughts (none pleasant) collided in my mind; I felt as if I were drowning in my own brain. I thought of how far away I would be from my family. I felt the burden of realizing the shame and humiliation my actions had brought them. My parents and grandparents gave me every opportunity to bring pride and distinction to our family. I made some wrong decisions that hurt many people and society. Eventually I decided I could not afford to wallow in self-pity; I had to prepare myself for what lay ahead. Yet I did not know what lay ahead. All I knew was that I must survive a sentence of four and one-half decades. I was on my way to a maximum-security penitentiary, and I tried to develop a strategy to help me endure the imminent prison experience.

A lengthy prison term seemed likely to rip apart my relationships. I was almost certain it would destroy my marriage. I had been married for only a few months before my arrest. Prison would offer no legitimate opportunities for me to contribute financially to my marriage. The intimacy in which marital and domestic problems ought to be discussed would be impossible to achieve. Furthermore, my wife would have needs that prison walls would preclude my fulfilling. I could not be there to hold her, to comfort her, or even to listen to her. The emptiness caused by realizing I would lose a relationship that I thought meant the world to me, and helplessness to do anything about it, brought forth a cold and dark loneliness in my soul. I did not know such loneliness was possible. I assumed it would grow inside of me for the duration of my prison term. I counted myself blessed that I had no children. On one hand, I was relieved that I would

not be abandoning children in addition to a wife I could not support. On the other hand, I felt sadness in knowing I would be too old to enjoy the experience of having children upon my release.

I spoke with other prisoners at USP Atlanta facing long-term incarceration who did have children. One prisoner, whom I will call Chris, has a four-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son. He was beginning a thirty-year term and felt helpless because he realized he would be unable to play a significant part in his children's education. He told them he was going away to school, and he worried about the time he would have to tell them he is serving a prison term. Chris recognizes his role as a father is to educate, discipline, and love his children. His prison term, however, will remove him from their entire childhood. The pain of his children being reared without their father's presence is much more difficult for Chris to bear than his prison sentence.

Another prisoner, Hector, is beginning a thirty-five year sentence. He has a six-year-old son who can visit only once each year because of the geographic distance between them. Hector's parents care for his son. The only thing Hector can do is let the child know through phone calls and a weekly letter that he has a father and is loved. He cannot hold the boy when he falls off his bicycle or congratulate him on a fine play he makes during a baseball game; he will not be with his son until the boy is a grown man. Hector's prison term is much more difficult because he knows he has a child in the world yet cannot contribute to his welfare.

Another prisoner, Ron, has a fourteen-year-old daughter who has had severe difficulty since his incarceration began. After Ron received a lengthy sentence, his wife sold all of the family's assets, then abandoned him and his daughter. Up until Ron's arrest, he enjoyed a close relationship with his daughter. But since his confinement, the girl's life has been turned upside down. Her mother absconded with the family's assets, her father is beyond her reach, and she is without money or a home and is living with an aunt who does not want her. The girl indicates

she is severely depressed and frequently writes about taking her own life. Ron took these letters to the prison psychologist. The psychologist tried to help Ron secure a transfer to a prison closer to his daughter. Excited at the prospect of a transfer, Ron called his daughter to relay the good news. The case manager controlling Ron's file, however, refused to process the transfer request until his next scheduled unit team meeting which was six months away. The news devastated Ron and shattered the girl, nearly driving her to suicide. Ron calls his daughter up to three times each day just to keep her calm. He is angry because of the obstacles placed before him by the BOP. He is far away from home, and his daughter's life is critically affected by the distance between them. Incarceration is more difficult for Ron and other parents in prison because they cannot give their children the comfort and support they need.

Besides not being able to have children, aging was another very real concern for me and the other prisoners facing long sentences. I began my term in confinement in my early twenties but would not breathe the fresh air of freedom until I was well into my sixties. At twenty years of age, it is difficult to imagine being thirty. It is much more difficult for a twenty-year-old prisoner to realize release from prison will not come until several decades pass.

Vincent, another prisoner with whom I spoke, began serving a thirty-year sentence when he was twenty-six-years-old. He says the reality of the sentence has not yet hit him. Five years is all Vincent can think about. For the first five years, Vincent will focus on the legal issues of his case. When five years have passed and if he remains incarcerated with no relief in sight, Vincent says he will be "hitting that wall every minute of the day." Escape will consume his every waking thought. Vincent absolutely refuses to leave prison as a decrepit old man without a life; he says his crime was not severe enough to warrant such a sentence. To Vincent, there is more honor in fighting for freedom, even if it means getting killed in the process, than to spend thirty years in prison waiting for death. There would be zero opportunity for Vincent to make up for time he lost in prison; he says he will give them five years, but he will not allow the prison

system to take thirty years of his life. The thought of growing old in prison is anathema to both Vincent and me, but our long sentences eclipse all thoughts of waiting for release to come.

And what is release? By the time the prison doors open for me I expect to know no one well except other male prisoners who have served long prison terms. Even if someone were to come and tell me I could go home immediately, that they would return control of my life to me, the news would leave me weary. I am growing numb to my surroundings. It is a strange numbness because I never know what will happen. There is a monotonous and regular routine, yet I know it can change abruptly, on an administrator's whim. There is no spark, no passion in life. The feelings and emotions men develop by living in a world with women and children are becoming more absent from my life. I will have neither a home nor a career. Being forced to live in close proximity with people I loathe will affect my life and my actions. And there will be violence. How can I escape it? I am young, and I will be living in a maximum-security prison. It is inevitable that I will be tried. And I will respond in the manner appropriate for prisons. Although I am not in fear of being robbed or beaten, the constant companionship of thieves, rapists, killers, aggressive homosexuals, and snitches who will say or do anything to save their own hide is far from relaxing. All of these factors exacerbate the tensions of beginning a long prison term. They will not prepare me for release. The coming of the Messiah seems closer than my release from prison.

These thoughts generate anxiety, apathy and depression. There was a pattern to those first years. I was nervous of what I would find in prison; then I did not care; and then an ocean of depression swallowed me. Such a long sentence did not seem real. How could it? The sentence was nearly twice as long as I had been alive on the planet. I was out of high school for only five years; then, suddenly I was staring down the long end of a forty-five year prison term. No violence was even alleged in my case, and it was my first commitment. I listened to numerous violent and repeat offenders around me complaining of sentences only a fraction as long as mine.

My thoughts began to turn away from the wrong decisions I made during the recklessness of youth, and turn toward the perceived injustices our criminal justice system was perpetuating against me and the friends I was meeting in prison. I was not alone.

There were numerous other prisoners around me. The vast majority were beginning lengthy prison terms for their participation in the illicit drug industry. Their level of cynicism was taller than the skyscrapers in New York City. Corrupt lawmakers and savings and loan bandits escape the pains of long-term imprisonment altogether, they complained, while people striving to pull themselves out of poverty regularly receive sentences totally disproportionate to their crimes. They laughed at the so-called war on drugs, more accurately describing it as a war on people.

One of the consequences of long prison terms is a loss of the prisoners' sense of their own efficacy. Prisoners are told where to live and with whom. They are issued clothing, and an indifferent administration prepares their food. They are forced to work in jobs bearing no relationship to their levels of skill, to their release dates, or to the types of employment they will receive upon release. The prison staff members tend to feel superior and righteous, while the social structure inside the prison proper brings the prisoners feelings of guilt, inferiority, and powerlessness. Time fills the prisoners with resentment and boredom. They lie on their beds staring at the bunks above them and the walls surrounding them. The prison system has taken their identities; it has removed their abilities to distinguish themselves. It tells the prisoners they can neither be trusted, given responsibility, nor opportunities to contribute to the welfare of the general community. Physical resistance is met with a massive show of force. Intellectual resistance is met with zip code changes and more subtle ways of upsetting progress. For example, those who use brawn to solve their problems will quickly be restrained with a team of prison guards. No prison mutiny has ever been successful. Prisoners who strive to upset the

system through organizational efforts will be transferred to another institution or given meaningless chores to replace their contemplative time.

Prisoners adopt individual methods of coping with and adjusting to the pressures of life in confinement. Once long-term prisoners get situated in prison cells, and are assigned prison jobs, they develop strategies for making their stay as light as possible. Most will look for ways to keep themselves busy mentally and physically, while a few will retreat into their own worlds and avoid contact with the prison system's social network. Many gradually lose interest in the world outside of prison walls and focus only on their time inside. They learn how to survive in prison by making it their business to know what the administration will tolerate. They want to know which prisoners are troublemakers and which prisoners mind their own business. They want to know which areas of the prison are tightly secured and which areas of the prison are loose. Long term prisoners will develop daily routines that enable them to achieve their individual goals while sliding past trouble. Prison is a microcosm of the larger society; what occurs behind the walls is intensified, exaggerated, and immediate. One prisoner said it is where you meet shock, hopelessness, helplessness, fear, depression, hate, extreme sadness, coldness and loneliness all at once. It all hits one like a freight train, and no one can help.

Support from family, friends, and educational programs has helped me cope in this environment. Nearly seven years have passed since I started this prison odyssey. I began and completed my undergraduate studies and now am nearly finished with a masters program I began independently at Hofstra University. Where many long-term prisoners lose interest in the outside world and become increasingly dependent on prison routines, other prisoners and I search for ways to contribute to and remain active with the world outside. Besides a demanding academic program, I also exercise regularly and keep an eye open for potential problems. Other active prisoners write prolifically, immerse themselves in the law library, or seek spiritual programs. I find a busy schedule keeps me away from trouble and focused on my academic goals; such goals

are meaningless, I realize, to many other prisoners. The prison system is not designed to inspire progress. Although administrators have ample sanctions from which they can draw to punish prisoners who break prison regulation, they neither encourage nor reward those who make significant progress behind prison walls.

Prisoners notice that an incentive system is missing. My studies of prisoners in the BOP suggest it is the reason such a minute percentage put forth the energy to develop skills that will enhance their chances for success upon release. Prisoners see no relationship between hard work and better living conditions; there is no indication their behavior in prison can help them advance their release dates. All prisoners with whom I spoke said they would zealously pursue educational programs if some type of meaningful incentive system existed. But there is no quid pro quo, no tit for tat. Accordingly, prisoners spend their time learning to live as comfortably as possible during their stay in prison. They become hustlers, scammers, and artists of the con. They learn to break rules without getting caught and take pride in beating the system. Their behavior is a natural response. They are compensating for a social structure that forces prisoners to live under a coercive system which tells them their efforts are worthless. A long-term prisoner who aspires to accomplish goals during incarceration is offensive to the administration because such a prisoner is not truly a prisoner. His or her mind is free. The administration demands that prisoners limit themselves to their functions as prisoners; doing time without attracting attention or disrupting the system.

Those facing long prison terms recognize prison as the world in which they will spend long periods of their lives. They will live without the companionship of the opposite sex; ties to their families and communities will separate. Relatives will both come into their families through birth and marriage and some will pass on through death; these events will happen without the prisoner's participation. Prison is the least likely place for positive changes to occur in human beings. It is an environment where such seemingly effortless activities as holding onto one's

identity and sanity take on a significance of paramount importance. Some prisoners say long prison terms are like drawn-out death sentences. I will just say they are futile and excessive acts of vengeance.

Update:

I wrote this article many years ago, when I was nearing completion of my graduate degree at Hofstra University. Now, in 2008, I am within five years of my release date. The other articles in this series show more of my adjustment through prison. Although I had to pass through periods of sadness during the first decade of confinement, the beacon of hope kept me striving forward. I want readers to understand that although the early portion of a prison term can be difficult, with long-term goals it is possible to power through and emerge strong.