

I Am Blessed

By Michael G. Santos
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because of the interactions I've had with others.*

As I write these thoughts, on a beautiful, sunny day in July, I'm sitting on a steel folding chair, alone in my prison cell. I am beginning my 17th year of imprisonment, and I expect to serve 10 more years before release will come. Many prisoners who serve so much time become callused and embittered against society, against other prisoners, and against the system that holds them. They have endured different experiences from the ones that I have known over the years, and as a consequence, I expect a bitter cynicism will plague the rest of their lives.

My life, on the other hand, is easier. I feel as though I've grown into a better person, as if I have been blessed because of the interactions I have had with others.

I was 23 in 1987, when I began serving this sentence for convictions related to the distribution of cocaine. There were no weapons or acts of violence in my case, and I had not been confined before. Even so, my sentencing judge devastated me by imposing a term of 45 years. It was a lot to absorb at that young age, and if it were not for the incredible support I received from my sisters, my parents, and my mentors, I would not have had the strength to brave through the thousands of days and nights ahead. Thoughts of the decades I expected to spend in confinement were a constant torture in my mind. I had pimples on my face when I started the term, but my black hair would be white by the time I would complete it, in 2013.

No one in my family had experienced the wrath of the criminal justice system before. They obviously were humiliated at my arrest, through my prosecution, and at the lengthy sentence I received. Rather than forsaking me, they came to visit on every possible visiting day. They wrote me letters, sent me books. Once I was sent to prison, they helped me find a

correspondence program through which I could study, then set aside money to fund my education. Because of the generous support I received from my parents and sisters, I had something to work toward. Their love and kindness gave me hope.

Some might expect family members to bond together and help one who has fallen. But I knew mine were special. I know their love was instrumental in pulling me through, that it gave me a reason to live when wicked thoughts of suicide tempted me. The support I received from family members never felt obligatory, as if they were somehow bound to come to my assistance. Instead, I felt waves of unconditional love, enough to keep me afloat through the lowest point of my life.

Because of their love, I never settled into my life as a prisoner. Instead, I lived for the future, always working to prepare myself for the day that release would come. Rather than a punishment, my imprisonment became a challenge for me. I felt as though I had a debt to pay, to make daily efforts toward a long-term plan that I hoped would redeem the crimes I had committed and reconcile me with society. The love and support I received spawned a tripartite plan, and I committed myself to following it throughout the 26-plus years I expected to serve on my sentence. I would educate myself, develop the virtue of discipline, and contribute to communities inside and outside of prison fences.

As the weeks turned into months and the months turned into years, I felt kindness begin to flow to me from people with whom I had no previous relationships. Like manna from heaven, it was a gift. I was studying through correspondence, struggling through courses that I hoped would lead to a university degree. As I read the work of various professors, I thought about their lives, about the different choices they had made and the fulfillment that must come from knowing that they had chosen a profession that would contribute to the lives of others. While lying awake at night, staring at the sagging steel springs of the bunk above me with these

thoughts in my mind, I felt moved to write. I introduced myself through unsolicited personal letters. I did not know then that those letters would change my life.

Several of the professors whom I wrote responded warmly, and over the years we developed relationships as if I were a member of their families. They traveled great distances to come visit me, introduced me to their spouses and children. They inspired me to push forward, helping me to earn an undergraduate, and a graduate degree. Then they opened opportunities for me to publish my own work through my own website. Their love and acceptance helped me find meaning in my life, helped me realize that even from within the depths of the federal prison system I could contribute to the lives of others.

The love and kindness I have received has made all the difference. It gave me the strength to grow during the first 16 years I have served, and helps me sail effortlessly through this final decade. While I serve these last 10 years, I hope to emulate those who have shown me so much compassion. Indeed, I hope to help others feel that they, too, are blessed.