

Making Better Choices

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Contributions to society can help prisoners bring meaning to their lives. I participate in programs to help at-risk adolescents make better choices, and this is one of the speeches I deliver.

Good morning and thank you for your attention. As we were driving over here from the federal prison, I was reminded of my hometown in Seattle. I also was reminded of all the places where I would rather be than locked inside a federal prison. I'm sure these guys behind me would rather be somewhere else, too. But they can't be anywhere else. And I can't be anywhere else. We made some bad decisions in our lives that resulted in criminal convictions. As a consequence of those decisions, we no longer have the freedom to choose how we spend our time. That's what I want to speak with you about today. Making choices.

I'm sure you guys would rather be someplace else too. I don't know how old you are. I'm guessing you're about 15, 16, or maybe 17. You'll have to excuse me if I've misjudged your age. It's been a long time since I've been around young faces. I wasn't given any information about who you are or why you're here, so I've just had to make assumptions. Yet it doesn't really matter how old you are. I'm certain that you'd rather be someplace else than sitting inside a closed room listening to a group of old convicts complaining about how tough their lives are.

The point is, no one here can be anyplace else. We have lost the freedom to choose how we spend our lives. Those are the consequences that follow problems with the law. We lose our freedom. I know a lot about losing freedom, because I lost my freedom in 1987. By the looks of your faces, I would bet that none of you were even alive in 1987. That was the year my judge sentenced me to 45 years in prison. More than 21 years have passed since then, and I don't expect prison boundaries to open for me until I pass another several years. It's been a long time already, and I expect it will be a lot longer before I'm released.

My name is Michael Santos. I've been locked up since I was 23 for the bad decisions I made. At the time, I didn't know anything about the criminal justice system or the consequences that would follow my actions. You guys may find this hard to believe, but back then, I didn't even think of myself as a criminal. I can assure you that the government thought differently. Just as I can assure you that these officers who are supervising my presentation think differently. They see me as a criminal. Regardless of what I accomplish while I'm in prison, they always will see me as a criminal. That is one of the consequences that follow a criminal conviction. No one will ever see you as anything else.

I'm in prison because I sold cocaine. I didn't sell cocaine because I was an addict or a drug abuser. I sold it because I foolish enough to think I could elude law enforcement. I also thought the rewards outweighed the risks associated with it. I was wrong. Clearly I wasn't smart enough to elude law enforcement. The ignorance I had about the law certainly did not prepare me to evaluate all the risks to which I was exposing myself.

For one thing, I certainly had no idea that my actions could have resulted in a possible sentence of life without parole. I guess I had one of those soft-on-crime liberal judges because he only sentenced me to 45 years. He sentenced me to that time despite my having no history of violence, weapons use, or previous confinement. That is something you need to be thinking about. Regardless of your past criminal history, if you commit a crime in today's more punitive society, you may face severe sanctions. I know.

I began serving my sentence behind the 40-foot walls of the United States Penitentiary in Atlanta. I don't know if you guys know anything about maximum-security prisons, but they are dangerous places. Rico, a guy in there who later became a friend of mine explained it to me. He told me that anyone could become a tough guy in the penitentiary. He only had to be willing to take any problem all the way. Rico knew something about that. He began his term with a five-year sentence. But he had made some decisions in the penitentiary that resulted in him

slamming a knife into another man's neck. He killed him, and as a consequence of his actions, he was sentenced to a life term.

You see, prison is the kind of place where a man may be stabbed 20 or 30 times because he spent too much time on the telephone, or because he moved too slowly in a chess game. It's the kind of place where a man might take a steel pipe and smash it down on another man's skull because he feels that his honor was challenged, or because he did not think he received the proper amount of respect. Prison is a twisted world. It is a place where every prisoner wishes he could leave, but a place where wishes mean nothing. The only thing that matters in prison is time passing. And lots of it.

I spoke about the concept of honor and respect. In prison, those concepts frequently lead to violence. Remember, people in prison have no compunction or reservations about stabbing another man so as to bring blood shooting out of his body like water shooting out of a fountain. Yet the terms honor and respect in prison have very different meanings than those terms connote in society. In prison, having honor and respect means that a man lives as a stand-up convict. But what's that? Well, a stand-up convict is one who lives according to a code of beliefs and principles that are completely inconsistent with the beliefs and principles outside of prison walls.

In the free world, a man earns honor and respect in many ways. He educates himself, he develops skills, he finds employment and supports his family, contributes to his community. Those actions don't mean anything in the twisted world of prison. In prison, what is important is a man's capacity to hate. It's a world that I hope you never know. You need to make choices that will bring you honor and respect in the free world. You need to ensure you never enter these mausoleums, these tombs. That's what prisons are. They are tombs, and every day we spend inside of them, a little bit of our humanity dies. I know because I have spent more than 7,500

consecutive days inside. And I expect that I will serve more than a thousand days before my release.

When I began serving this term, I had no idea what prison administrators expected of me. I told you that I was only 23 then. Now I've passed my entire adult life in these cages, and I still don't know what they expect of me. When you think of federal correctional institutions, I suppose it's only reasonable that you think some correcting goes on. Or when you think of the word penitentiary, you may think of the root word, penitent, which means to be sorry for sins committed. Yet from my perspective, there is not much correcting inside prisons, and no one gives a hoot whether anyone is sorry. In fact, anyone who expresses penitence will be viewed as cry baby, a whiner, or a manipulator. Prisons are about serving time. As I said before, lots of it.

Prison administrators will tell you that cages exist for four specific goals. They say that prisons are supposed to rehabilitate prisoners, that they are supposed to deter others from committing criminal acts, that they are supposed to punish, and that they are supposed to incapacitate those convicted of breaking criminal laws. Well, of those four goals, prisons fail at three of them.

Prisons do not rehabilitate. No matter what accomplishments a man makes while he serves time inside boundaries, nothing will matter except the offenses he committed. It makes no difference how many university degrees he has earned, how many books he has written, or how many contributions he has made to society. There are a million ways for a man to make his time more difficult in prison, but there is nothing he can do to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of those who are holding him. All that matters is time. Again, lots of it.

Nor do prisons seem to deter others from committing criminal acts. When I came into prison our nation held fewer than 600,000 people locked in cages. Today America incarcerates more than 2.3 million people. That is more people than live in the state of Rhode Island. You guys know what I'm talking about. You're only teenagers and you're already locked up in some

kind of program. We live in a punitive society, one that responds to crime by locking people in cages. When people are out running with the pack, they are not thinking about the consequences of their actions. I don't think anyone quit selling cocaine just because I was sentenced to serve 45 years.

You may find this hard to believe, but I don't even feel as if I am being punished. Not any more. I've served too much time inside prison for me to know what punishment is. Punishment ended for me after my arrest and the first few years I passed in here. Now I just expect it. In fact, I don't know any other life. This is all I know. I expect staff members to talk to me as if I am six years old. I expect that everyone who speaks to me will think I am a liar. I expect to have to live with noise and aggravation and filth. That is prison and it is the only life I know. So the punishment, at least for me, ended a long time ago. After all these years, I have adapted.

The final goal of imprisonment is to incapacitate, to isolate from society those who have been convicted of breaking American laws. In that respect, prisons succeed brilliantly. You see, we are separated from the society you know in every way. The only reason we are with you here today is because you are in some kind of trouble yourself. Social workers, or jailers, or whoever is charged with the responsibility holding you brought you here to listen with hopes that you might learn something from a group of felons. It's like taking a tour through Hell before you've actually died and had an opportunity to repent. If you were not participating in this program for juveniles, you would not be allowed to listen to our stories, not unless you were serving time.

As federal prisoners we are not allowed to meet people whom we did not know prior to our terms of imprisonment. Our access to the telephone is limited to fewer than ten minutes per day. I know you are of the Internet generation and spend a lot of time on-line or using e-mail to communicate with your friends. No one in federal prison, however, has access to a computer

with Internet capabilities. In fact, I can hardly access a typewriter. This is what prison is about. Deprivation. Isolation. Anyone who comes inside must know what type of life they have chosen.

Prison brings a life that is totally separate from the life that exists outside. Administrators will try to filter news from society and they will filter the news that prisoners try to send out. The slightest abuse of telephone privileges may result in loss of telephone privileges for a year, for five years, or longer. I know some men inside who have lost the privilege of communicating with anyone outside for ten years. When a man hobbles through prison fences, he simultaneously separates himself from society.

Several years ago, I was married in a prison visiting room. Yet I have never spent time with my wife outside of a prison visiting room. We nurture our relationship under the watchful eyes of prison guards. We hold hands, but we do so knowing that we are being watched. We kiss when our visit begins, and we kiss again when our visit ends. That is all the affection we're allowed to show. This is the life a prisoner must accept. I know that I am privileged to have such visits. Because after a man passes year after year in prison, links to society tend to fade away like an early-morning mist.

We are in prison because of the convictions that followed the bad choices we made. There is no one to blame for the predicaments we have created for ourselves. You need to know that if you come to prison, there will be no one to blame but yourselves for the choices you've made. You cannot blame a criminal defense attorney whom you think did not provide you with adequate representation. You cannot blame your partner in crime who told on you. You cannot blame a vicious prosecutor. The only person to blame is the person who committed the criminal act in the first place, or the person who associated with other criminals. We all make choices. For some of us, prison is the consequence that follows those choices.

I am going to leave you with three thoughts that I hope you will take with you. I hope you will refer to them when you are confronted with decisions that could influence your life. After all, you're all quite young, and we both know that you can make choices that can lead to happiness. But what is happiness? Is it a new car? Is it the latest fashion? Is it money in your pocket? A wise thinker said that happiness is when everything you say and everything you think and everything you do is in harmony. Here are three strategies that will help you find that harmony.

The first concept I want you to consider is positive thinking. The second is goal-oriented living. The third is letting your goals lead you to action. Take a minute to think about each one.

Positive thinking. It is important to consider how we think. When I was in my early 20s, before my life began inside prison fences, I never gave much thought to how I was thinking. You can see the consequences that followed. I didn't understand the gravity with which law enforcement would respond to the crimes I was committing. I was consumed with the ease with which I was reaping illicit profits. Nothing else even entered my mind. I hope you think differently. I hope you think about where you want to go in life, and then consider how your behavior and actions contribute to those thoughts. Use goals to help.

Goal-oriented living means that your life follows a plan. You should realize that success does not come by accident. Those who achieve high places in life succeed because of deliberate choices that they made. You can make such choices. Just think about what you want to become. Project yourself five years forward. Ten years forward. Who will you be then? What kind of job will you have? What preparations must you make now to ensure that you reach your goals? Once you clearly define the goals that are important for you, it is easy to establish a strategy that will lead you to success. Your goals can lead you to action.

Those goals are a road map that will lead you from where you are today to where you want to go. We all know that we are who we are today because of the choices that we made

yesterday. Similarly, we know that the decisions we make today will lead us into the type of person we become tomorrow. If you want to achieve honor and respect in the community that matters, then consider whether your thoughts are positive. Do they contribute to your community? If the answer is yes, then set yourself a series of goals against which you can measure your progress. Use those goals to push you to action.

You're all so young. You ought to be thinking about finishing high school. You need to prepare yourselves for college, or for learning a trade. At this stage in your life there is nothing that you cannot become. Don't make decisions that can lead you to prison. Prison is a society of losers, and I urge you to think of the wonderful life you can create for yourself as long as you make different decisions than I made as a younger man.

I wish you well. I wish you success.