

## **My Literary Escape From Punishment**

By Michael G. Santos  
June 12, 2004

*How reading helped me persevere, prepare, and prosper through my 45-year prison term.*

Not long after my arrest, in 1987, I began thinking of suicide. I was 23 during that weak time of my life. After leading a scheme to distribute cocaine for just under two years, the federal government had charged me with offenses that could result in my spending the rest of my life in prison. The prospect frightened me.

It did not matter that there were no weapons or allegations of violence in my case. Nor did it matter that I hadn't been incarcerated before. The United States of America had declared war against people with any relationship to illicit drugs. As a cocaine dealer, I had made a series of criminal decisions that rendered me an enemy of the state. Once captured, I had to examine my fortitude. I found it wanting.

I am responsible for the bad decisions of my early adulthood, despite my not thinking very clearly during that difficult transition between adolescence and maturity. Rather than making independent and prudent choices, I listened to and was influenced by those around me. In jail, I was surrounded by others who spewed hatred and vitriol. Many felt themselves wrongfully imprisoned, betrayed by criminal accomplices or what they described as a system of vengeance.

Instead of acknowledging my own wrongdoing, I listened to my defense attorney who convinced me that a scorched-earth defense strategy would enable me to escape punishment through an acquittal. Following my criminal actions with more bad decisions—like continuing my relationship with the ongoing scheme after my arrest, proceeding through trial despite my guilt, perjuring myself by denying my involvement while under oath in a court of law—I fanned the flames burning around me, exposing myself to deeper rings of judicial damnation. It was my

character (or lack thereof), that I came to learn was my weakest trait.

I passed several months locked in my jail cell. Those were the days when I was most vulnerable. As I contemplated the possibility of life in prison, death seemed preferable, if a more cowardly choice. In that jail cell, however, while waiting for my trial to begin, I noticed that there were no hooks from which I could hang myself, no knives or blades with which I could cut myself, and certainly no gun with which I could shoot myself. Suicide did not seem a viable option. Not then. I hardened my resolve for the trial. If I were acquitted, life would proceed; if convicted, I expected to hold on through my sentencing and transfer to prison, where I hoped to find balance.

By the time my criminal proceedings had concluded, the judge who had presided over my trial had imposed a term of 45 years. The laws under which I was convicted would require me to serve more than 26 years of that term in prison; I would serve the remainder under some form of community supervision. I was devastated and considered how such a sanction could equate to justice. Then, as good fortune would have it, I found a few books that began to open my mind and bring me strength. They were in a cardboard box stuffed under the sink of the jail's living unit where I was being held. The top of the box was filled with Westerns and Romance novels, but as I dug through the stacks of paperbacks, I found Plato's *Republic* and another book describing the trials of Socrates. Those were the beginnings of my readings in philosophy, my education, and the fortitude that has seen me through seventeen years of imprisonment.

As I read through Plato's work, I began to realize the inadequacy of my education. I had lived without the sound of music since my arrest, but the logic and eloquence that flowed from those writings sounded more beautiful than any rhythm or melodies that I had heard before. I began staying awake late into the night, reading with a dictionary by my side as I struggled to grasp the purpose behind laws, their importance to society, and every citizen's responsibility to abide by them. Through those writings of classical times, I began to recognize meaning in the

life that was ahead of me.

Ending my life, I came to accept, would only hurt and shame my family further. Like Socrates drank the hemlock, I had to push myself through the labyrinth of time. Twists and turns lay in wait, yet by responding well to the turmoil ahead, I convinced myself that I could emerge from the depths with integrity, temperance, and discipline—virtues that had been missing from the empty life I had been leading. Books, and the journeys through which they took me, I came to learn, could clear the clouds in my mind and lift me from despair to hope.

My jailers moved me to prison, a walled, high-security variety in Atlanta. That transfer took me across the country, far away from my family and friends in Seattle. Visits would come rarely as I began that nadir-phase of my life. Still, books brought me solace, easing the feelings of estrangement I came to know with intimacy. Plato ushered me into the world of wisdom, inspiring me to learn more. I began to study formally, setting goals, small, even steps that would help me work toward an undergraduate and graduate degree. Although I could not attend the university, books brought the learning to me.

Besides the books required for my schoolwork, I sought others that would introduce me to great minds and ways of life that I had not known previously. One of my earliest favorites was Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, which inspired me to make the most of my life, despite the obstacles in which I was mired. Over time, I read all of Rand's published works, as I came to identify with her personal pursuit of excellence. Her books inspired me to study Nietzsche, Sartre, Dostoyevsky, and other philosophers who encouraged man to reach higher.

Biographies were helpful, too, especially those describing lives that triumphed through adversity. I remember lying in my bed reading the autobiography of Malcolm X, a militant American who began to educate himself from the inside of a jail cell. I was very much impressed with the efforts Malcolm made to develop his vocabulary. He rightfully came to recognize words as tools, or weapons, and used them to become a powerful and influential speaker.

Others in the prison questioned why I would read such a book. The racial tension in these closed communities frequently runs high. Although he was powerful and influential among militant Muslims and black Americans, the teachings of Malcolm X were controversial and not universally embraced. I dispelled the hatred and venom of his work, but took in the discipline and strategies he used to overcome the chains of ignorance and imprisonment. In the end, I hoped that my readings and studies would help me reconcile with society and atone for the bad decisions of my youth.

I read the Bible on multiple occasions, from cover to cover, finding strength in many of the stories. I especially liked The Book of Job, the story of the Prodigal Son, and the teachings of Christ that urged compassion for all, even those in prison. Although I found myself separating from what I perceived as dogmas of organized religion, my readings opened my mind spiritually, helping me to find peace with God and the world around me. The more I read from the spiritual genre, the more convinced I became that my mission in life was to learn, to teach, to grow, and to contribute to the lives of others. Reading, and writing, too, helped me with that perennial pursuit, bringing me a level of freedom that carried me through each day, season, and year.

I don't know how many books I have read since I began my life as a prisoner, but I am sure the tally is well into the four digits. The work of fiction has both entertained and educated me, helping me to appreciate the beauty of language while escaping the ugliness of prison. I admire the artistic mind of Tolstoy, the wit of Voltaire, and the compassion of Hugo. But if I were to select one novel as a favorite from all the literature that I have read, for me it is without question the work of Miguel de Cervantes in his classic story of romance, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. Whereas *Les Miserables* made me fear the struggles that will follow a quarter century of confinement, in *Don Quixote* I found laughter and tears and beautiful expressions of love.

I choose most of my books from the nonfiction shelves of our library. I try to learn from the techniques and styles of authors who describe their subject matter with panache and verve. I aspire to emulate their work in my efforts to help others understand the American prison system, the people it holds, and strategies for growing through confinement. Earlier this week I finished a memoir by Alice Sebold. She described a horrific personal experience with eloquence; in time, as I work to hone my own writing skills, I will strive to bring readers into my world as Sebold brought me into hers.

Had I been a reader earlier in my life, I could have learned more from both the good and bad decisions of others. Such experiences, I am sure, would have made indelible impressions upon my mind and perhaps kept me from the bad decisions that led to my lengthy imprisonment. I prohibit myself from looking back. Instead, I rely upon the wonderful world of letters and literature to carry me through and lift me toward a better life ahead. In so doing, I feel as though I am beating the prolonged punishment of my life. Isn't it rich?