

## **My Mentor**

By Michael G. Santos  
March 15, 2004

*Because of the guidance I received from an incredible mentor,  
I lead a life filled with meaning, love, and promise.*

I am a long-term prisoner. As such, many people expect me to live a life that alternates among fits of envy, sadness, loneliness, rage, self-pity, and other negative emotions. Yet because of the guidance I received from Dr. R. Bruce McPherson, an incredible Christ-like mentor, I lead a life filled with meaning, love, and promise. I am blessed.

My prison term began long ago. When I was a younger man I made some bad decisions. At 23, in 1987, I was arrested for my participation in a scheme to distribute cocaine. There is no excuse for the crimes I had committed. I was not a drug abuser, just a greedy adolescent looking for an easy way to riches. Instead, my actions led me into the clutches of the criminal justice system. After a lengthy trial, a jury rightfully convicted me of the charges against me. Then, despite my having no history of violence, weapons use, or previous imprisonment, my sentencing judge thought it appropriate to impose a 45-year sentence. I am now in my 17th year of this term.

The initial months after my arrest were difficult. I had trouble adjusting because the illusion that I had been living was shattered, and because it had become apparent to me that the criminal decisions I had made were going to have lifelong repercussions. With such a long sentence to serve. I felt as if my existence had no meaning. I had humiliated my family and disappointed those in my community with the troubles I had created. In the darkness of my prison cell, suicide or slipping into oblivion seemed preferable to enduring the challenges I expected to encounter over the many years ahead. Every day felt like a struggle, and I had no direction to carry me through.

After a year had passed, and all of my court proceedings were behind me, I was transferred from the local jail system to the United States Penitentiary in Atlanta, the first of many federal prisons where I would serve my term. With a forty-foot wall surrounding the 100-year old penitentiary, it was frightening. As I was being processed into the prison, I remember the glare of several hardened convicts. To me, some seemed the personification of evil. Their skin was covered in the blue-green ink of jailhouse tattoos—spider web designs, demonic skulls, lightening bolts and swastikas. The tattoos were meant to evoke fear, I thought. They worked.

More than 2,500 prisoners serve time inside those penitentiary walls. It was a veritable city of felons. Many of the men had been incarcerated for more than 20 years already, and some expected that they would never live outside of prison boundaries again. For them it was the last stop, and I knew that it could be for me as well.

As a young man, certainly one of the youngest on that prison compound, I knew that I was responsible for my predicament. I also knew that I would need help to emerge from the lengthy term I expected to serve. I felt ashamed of the decisions I had made which sank me into this viper pit, and I felt a need over the coming years and decades to redeem myself, to reconcile with society for the criminal actions of my youth. I needed a ladder to emerge from the depths and reach the surface.

I found a correspondence program through Ohio University that would allow me to begin working independently toward a Bachelor of Arts degree, and through those studies, I mentally escaped my confinement. Every day opened a new opportunity to prove to myself that I was more than a prisoner. The environment was filled with negativity. Staff members and other prisoners alike constantly told me that I would never finish the degree. One supervisor of education who was unhappy about my constantly requesting authorization to receive books for my course work suggested that since there were no parole opportunities, and since I did not work

to educate myself prior to my confinement, I ought to quit all of the extra work I was creating for him, his staff, and myself.

Through my studies I met Mark, another prisoner who was more advanced than I, but also very much interested in completing further coursework. Mark had been incarcerated for several years already. He had completed a few years of college and was well read. I knew that I could learn from him and we developed a friendship. Mark told me that his sister held an administrative position at a North Carolina teaching center, and that she had introduced him to Dr. R. Bruce McPherson, one of the educators. I asked Mark whether it would be possible to introduce myself to Dr. McPherson through a letter, and Mark offered to send one on my behalf. For the next couple of weeks, I waited with high hopes that Dr. McPherson would give me the privilege of learning from him through a correspondence.

As a prisoner, I was hungry for guidance. I expected to serve a long time. By the time I met Mark, I had conditioned my mind to think in blocks of ten years. During those first ten years I was serving, I wanted to distinguish myself in some way, to develop skills that I hoped would help prepare me to make contributions to society, both inside and outside of prison walls. Yet I also wanted to reach outside of the penitentiary to find positive influences that could help me develop. I knew that my prolonged exposure to prison would retard my growth, and I hoped that Dr. McPherson would mentor me. That was in 1989, at the very beginning of my term.

About a week passed before Mark received word from Dr. McPherson. When he did, the professor made it clear that he did not consider me a prisoner, but a fellow human being. That was a change. The professor said that he would welcome a letter from me and authorized Mark to pass along his address. I remember the optimism I felt with that simple news. By then I had been studying with Ohio University for several months, and each assignment that I completed felt like a new step on the ladder I was trying to build that would liberate me from the bad decisions of my past. Although I was deeply committed to my studies, I had never stepped foot

on a university campus, never walked through the corridors of books that make up university libraries. Educators, and especially university professors, were like gods to me. In my mind, they represented everything good, everything that I was not.

Taking in this news that Dr. McPherson looked forward to a letter from me filled me with vigor, with hope. Since my imprisonment began, I lived as if I were a shadow of a man. Other than my immediate family members, I felt cut off from society. Despite my longing to interact with others, to participate in society somehow, my confinement and the guilt I wore felt like an anchor that held me down. It was as if I lived in a purgatory of sorts. This opportunity to communicate with Dr. McPherson, an educator, a shaper of minds and good character, felt like I had received an invitation to communicate directly with an angel. I suddenly had more hope than I had thought possible, and I happily spent hours drafting my first letter to Bruce.

At that time in my life, writing was a difficult labor, a grind that exhausted my mind. I wanted to improve my ability to communicate with words, especially in writing, and in my first letter to Bruce I asked for his help. Through that letter I described my background, telling him what a poor student I had been in high school and how my immaturity and lack of discipline led me to actions resulting in my imprisonment. I asked for his help with my education, and for his guidance to make me a better person. If he was willing, I suggested, he could begin by helping me improve my writing skills.

After I addressed Bruce's letter and sent it out, I began counting the days I expected to pass before a response would come. In prison, as in hospitals and other institutions, mail takes on significance to personal lives that vastly surpasses its relevance outside. Some prisoners pass years without receiving word of anyone or anything that they once held dear; others receive loads of mail each week. Although I had had no previous connection with Dr. McPherson, I awaited his letter with the anticipation of a man on death row awaiting a pardon. As a director

for an advanced teaching academy, I expected he was busy and figured on at least three weeks to month passing before I would hear from him. I was wrong.

I received Bruce's response within days. He clearly wrote me back immediately upon receipt of my initial letter. When I read his well-expressed thoughts, I realized that Bruce was as enthusiastic as I about beginning a long-term friendship. He wasted no time in helping me improve my writing skills; along with descriptions of his family, interests, and career, Bruce returned the actual letter I wrote. When I received it, however, it was bleeding with red ink. He had taken the time to point out the many grammatical and stylistic errors I made in my writing. Thus began a correspondence that I came to learn from and cherish for the next several years.

Bruce had some experience with the federal prison system, as he had been corresponding with Mark for over a year before we exchanged letters. He knew that in order to visit, I would need to send an application form he would complete and return to administrators at USP Atlanta. A counselor assigned to me would run a background check on Bruce, and, if appropriate, add him to my list of approved visitors.

In Bruce's first letter, he suggested that I send him a visiting application form. I remember feeling extraordinarily fortunate that this distinguished leader had come into my life. Not only was he willing to overlook the flaws in my character which led me to prison, he also was willing to contribute to my education through our correspondence. In addition, I learned that he was willing to travel across several state lines at his own expense in order to grant me the privilege of shaking his hand. I felt as if my life had taken an important turn for the better in meeting Bruce. He gave me hope in myself, and in the future I hoped to create.

When I wrote back to Bruce, I expressed my gratitude for his offer to visit, but explained that there might be some complication. For reasons that are not explained to prisoners, the Bureau of Prisons has a firm rule which requires a prisoner to have had relationships with proposed visitors prior to the prisoner's incarceration. Besides the fact that Bruce and I did not

have a relationship before my arrest, there was an additional complication in that Bruce was on Mark's visiting list already; another prison rule is that a visitor cannot be authorized on the visiting lists of more than one prisoner unless there is an immediate family relationship. I sent the application form to Bruce with a full explanation of the challenges. They did not daunt him.

Bruce returned the completed application to my counselor, along with a lengthy letter explaining his interest as an educator in contributing to my efforts to prepare for a law-abiding life upon my release. Bruce also sent his curriculum vitae as an offer of his credentials to serve in the capacity of voluntary mentor. The counselor initially rejected Bruce's request to visit, as the rules were quite clear. Bruce, however, demonstrating his commitment to help, appealed to the warden of the institution for consideration. God was with us, as the warden made an exception to the policy, authorizing Bruce to pass time with me during regularly scheduled visiting hours.

Bruce and I exchanged at least two letters per week while working our way through the visiting complications. Soon after the warden approved Bruce to visit me, he made the long drive from North Carolina to USP Atlanta. He arrived early on a Saturday morning and stayed with me for six hours. Although we had come to know something about each other through our correspondence, visiting brought an entirely new dimension to our relationship. I remember the excitement I felt that morning when I heard my name paged to the visiting room. I had no family or friends who lived nearby, so visiting came infrequently for me. Even so, meeting Bruce was going to be different. He was someone whom I respected immensely; someone who I expected could introduce me to values and concepts that I had not been exposed to prior to my imprisonment. I felt as if our meeting would lift me, raising my life to a higher level.

As I walked into the brightly lit visiting room, Bruce welcomed me to his table. Recognizing me from a photograph I had sent, he stood to shake my hand. A large man, Bruce stood well over six feet tall and weighed perhaps 350 pounds; he had struggled with obesity for several years, I learned. Bruce had a round face, blond hair and brilliant blue eyes that drilled

into me as I spoke. Not judgmental, he seemed the epitome of tolerance. Bruce always questioned me with the intention of understanding my motivations, my values, trying to lead me through his inquiries to contemplate the probable consequences of my actions. Sitting with him for several hours made me feel as if I were one of those students who sat before Socrates, evolving and learning through my own responses to the insightful questions he asked.

Bruce was a consummate educator, a man who devoted his life to helping others grow. His motivation was watching others, no matter from what station in life they came, reach their highest human potential. As the years passed, Bruce welcomed me into his life as if I were a son. He introduced me to his wife, Carolyn, and opened a correspondence for me with his children, his brother, and his friends. He helped me realize that prison boundaries might be a consequence to the bad decisions of my youth, but that through education, I could free my mind, my spirit, and become one with the fabric of the broader community. In many ways, Bruce's friendship, guidance, and mentoring prepared me for the richness and peace in my life today, despite the many years of imprisonment I still have ahead of me.

Several years after I met Dr. McPherson, he retired from his professional career. Besides being a leader of the North Carolina institution, he also was a tenured professor of education at the University of Illinois. He and Carolyn had made their home and reared their children in Chicago. After their retirement, Bruce and Carolyn began devoting more time to the lives of others. They volunteered to provide individual counseling to inner-city residents who struggled to find stability in society. Over the many years of our relationship we exchanged weekly letters, and I always felt moved when he described the time he and Carolyn were devoting to help others improve their reading skills, prepare a resume, or enter a GED program. They also offered more immediate help, like a ride to an interview, clothing or childcare services. He seemed to derive his greatest satisfaction in life by clearing away the perceived obstacles that block the success of others.

Bruce's constant attention to my life kept me motivated through my academic studies. I wanted to prove myself worthy of the trust and commitment he had invested by welcoming me into his family. His love gave me a reason to push myself harder, to make decisions that would help me avoid conflict inside the volatile atmosphere of the penitentiary. In 1992, I earned my undergraduate degree, and immediately thereafter Bruce provided the guidance that would help Hofstra University admit me into its graduate program so that I could earn a Master of Arts degree. With Bruce's help, I made some progress studying toward a Ph.D., but my inability to complete a residency requirement prohibited me from completing the coursework for that degree during my imprisonment. Nevertheless, Bruce continued to work with me, exposing my mind to aspects of life that would have been otherwise off limits to me because of my imprisonment.

Recognizing that I had no knowledge of art, Bruce made a habit of sending me museum brochures and postcards of works of art. He sent me a gift subscription to *The Smithsonian* magazine. His weekly letters frequently discussed the work of famous painters—Picasso, van Gogh, Gauguin. I have several large cards printed with Monet's *Water Lilies*. Bruce loved the Impressionists and often challenged me to define the mood or meaning of particular paintings. It was a struggle for me, as I lacked the refinement to appreciate great works of art that so moved him.

Bruce not only brought art appreciation into my life, he also introduced me to literature, constantly sending me books that he hoped would expand my consciousness. He wanted me to realize my responsibilities as a citizen of the world, and hoped that by acquainting me with the lessons of great writers I would come to see that life advances not only through pragmatism, but also through altruism and contributions to society. Now that I am 40, and 17 years into my prison sentence, I am learning that making such contributions can enrich my life even if there is no immediate payoff. These lessons I have learned from Dr. McPherson will remain with me, and I

will work the rest of my life to pass them on to others. Bruce lived as a model of good citizenship, and it is a model that I will strive to emulate.

Our country now confines more than 2.1 million human beings. The prison system has grown so overcrowded that administrators have sacrificed funds for development programs that would offer inmates opportunities to prepare for a life after confinement in order to meet the costs of greater security measures. Through Bruce's intervention in my life I was able to educate myself despite those budget cuts. Further, he has helped me create independent projects that enable me to contribute to the lives of others. His steady guidance and commitment have prepared me to live as a member of society, and his influence has helped me cope with the frustrations of imprisonment responsibly, with equanimity and a commitment to continue these efforts to reconcile with society. The prison system has not corrected me. My growth as a citizen has come through the sponsorship of Dr. R. Bruce McPherson.

On Thanksgiving evening, 2003, Bruce passed on to eternal life. I regret that I did not earn my release in time for him to see the influence his leadership has had on me. When my release comes, however, I will do my part to keep Bruce's alive by doing everything within my power to help others grow.