

CHAPTER 16: LIVE WITH GRATITUDE AND APPRECIATION

In the Straight-A Guide, we urge people to live in gratitude and to appreciate the blessings that come their way. Even in confinement, or in crisis, we still have blessings, and it's our responsibility to prove worthy of the blessings we receive.

A person may define success, set goals, develop the right attitude, aspire to something better, take disciplined action, hold himself accountable, build awareness, live authentically, and earn incremental achievements. If he does not live in gratitude, however, negative emotions such as bitterness, anger, hatred, or apathy can undermine progress.

A person may advance faster if he does not dwell on all that he has lost. If he does, he may fail to see and appreciate all that remains. He may become so consumed by what the system took from him that he loses sight of the people, ideas, opportunities, and disciplines he can still develop in order to keep building.

For that reason, the final lessons of the Straight-A Guide emphasizes the importance of living in gratitude. As one example, I am extremely grateful to the many people who taught and inspired me. It is one reason I built a personal ministry of sharing those lessons with others. I am grateful to administrators in the system who allow me to provide these lessons, and I am grateful to every member of the Prison Professors community. Each person is part of the change I want to see, and I believe we are aligned in wanting to open more pathways for people to earn freedom through merit.

In the context of the Straight-A Guide, appreciation is neither sentimentality nor weakness, nor does it deny the challenges of living in confinement. Appreciation is the discipline of recognizing that blessings come in many forms. They come with lessons, relationships, and opportunities we can create or seize, despite adversity.

A responsibility comes with those blessings. Each one allows a person to remain steady without becoming hard. It allows him to remain grateful without becoming naïve. It allows him to acknowledge pain without allowing pain to define the entire meaning of his life.

This lesson on living in gratitude helped me through prison, and has helped me since I finished my term, on August 12, 2013.

GRATITUDE IS NOT WEAKNESS

A person in prison loses a great deal, including liberty, income, privacy, comfort, reputation, time with family, friends, and community. Those losses can hurt. I would never suggest that a person should feel grateful for confinement, injustice, separation, humiliation, or the suffering that spreads through a family when someone enters the system. In my view, we confine too many people and they serve sentences that are far too long. When we measure justice by the length of time a person spends in prison, rather than by his effort to reconcile and rebuild, the system causes more harm than good. It contributes to intergenerational cycles of recidivism, and poverty.

Despite those challenges, I appreciated the blessings God gave me. I feel grateful that I have an opportunity to work toward changing the system. I'm also grateful that I get to work with other people who served lengthy terms in prison. The decisions they made while serving time opened opportunities for them, and now they're home. Consider the following people who are devoting so much time, energy, and resources to use their stories as a catalyst for change:

ADAM CLAUSON:

A federal judge sentenced Adam to a sentence of 213 years in federal prison. Rather than complaining, or waiting around for the system to change, Adam invested in himself and in his community. When President Trump signed the First Step Act, an opportunity opened for Adam's judge to consider releasing him under the provision of compassionate release. He's now free. Since getting out, Adam has built a life and career in the service of others, striving to bring changes that will bring relief to all people in federal prison.

MICHAEL "HARRY-O" HARRIS:

The state of California and the federal government brought charges against Harry-O that resulted in a sentence of life imprisonment, plus 20 years. Rather than allowing the time to consume him, a commitment to God led him into a life of service. He became active in prison, building programs that would help others reach their highest potential. Recognizing his positive contributions, President Trump commuted his sentence, and then issued him a full pardon. To show his gratitude,



Michael devoted his life to service, launching the Community First nonprofit, and he works tirelessly toward justice-related initiatives.

Charles “Duke” Tanner

A federal judge sentenced Duke to two life sentences for convictions related to the distribution of crack cocaine. While inside, Duke made a commitment to serve God and work toward advancing himself as a candidate for liberty. President Trump commuted his sentence, and then granted him a full pardon. Following his release, Duke built a career working to improve outcomes of America’s criminal justice system, and opening more opportunities with community development.

DAMON WEST

In an earlier chapter, I wrote about Damon and his inspiring story of the coffee bean. A judge sentenced him to serve 65 years in prison in Texas. Based upon his good works, the parole board allowed him to go home after seven years. Since then, he’s built a career to teach and inspire millions of people around the world, and also people who are serving sentences in American jails and prisons.

JASON BRYANT, TED GRAY, AND BRANDEN TERRELL:

Jason and Ted were codefendants. A judge sentenced both Jason and Ted to serve life terms in California. Jason is black and Ted is white. They’d been best friends since childhood. Yet the politics of prison discouraged them from continuing as friends. Despite being on the same yard, they adhered to prison politics for several years, not talking to each other. Then, Ted and Jason realized that it was far more important to live in gratitude, appreciative of the blessings they have. They began building music and sports programs to bring people together, and improve the culture of confinement. Their friend Branden Terrell, who was also serving a lengthy term in prison, joined their initiative. The governor of California commuted sentences and each of them got out. Upon their release, Jason, Ted, and Branden collaborated. They developed nonprofit organizations that work to serve people in prison, and men who want to transition into successful careers.

Struggle Jennings:

William Curtis Harness Jr is an award-winning musician who is known professionally as Struggle Jennings. The music industry has recognized him with numerous

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awards, including several gold and platinum records. In his music, Struggle shares stories about the time he spent in state and federal prisons. Regardless of what bad decisions a person has made, or what challenges he faced, Struggle's music provides hope and shows that a person can always work to build a better life.

Each of the men above went through challenging times in prison. Yet the decisions they made in prison put them on a pathway to a life of meaning, relevance, and dignity. They did not leave prison to focus on themselves. Instead, they use their own time and money to visit prisons across the United States, showing their appreciation for the blessings that have come their way. They inspire with the energy and investment they make to open more opportunities for people in prison to earn freedom through merit.

I'm grateful for every opportunity I have to visit prisons with them.

Although I couldn't return to prisons until a few years after I got out, in my case, the efforts had roots long before I finished my term. If I reflect, I can trace that chronology:

- » While in solitary confinement, reading the Bible opened my eyes and changed the way I think.
- » I came to accept that I have a duty to develop skills that lead to a full life and to work toward improving outcomes for society.
- » By reading about Frederick Douglass, Socrates, and Gandhi, I developed a methodical, intentional plan that allowed me to work toward being the change I wanted to see.
- » By earning academic credentials, publishers opened opportunities to work with university professors who authored books.
- » By writing books, I could contribute to society and begin spreading ideas that would influence changes such as incentives in the First Step Act.
- » By building credibility, I could develop relationships with federal judges, U.S. Attorneys, and leaders in the Bureau of Prisons.
- » With those relationships, I could develop programs that others could use to prepare for success upon release.
- » By developing businesses and financial independence, I could create resources to memorialize how many people are working to prepare for success.
- » With the data I collected, I could build arguments showing that we could lessen intergenerational cycles of failure and poverty by incentivizing the pursuit of excellence.

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- » By building transparency, I could persuade high-net-worth individuals, corporations, and Web 3.0 communities that are built on the BNB blockchain, to join me in supporting the mission. They participate by donating significant financial resources to further our mission and keep the cycle going.

I have always found reasons to live in gratitude, even though I had to spend my 20s, 30s, and 40s in prison. A person can acknowledge losses honestly while still recognizing what remains, what can still be built, who has helped him, what lessons he has learned, and what opportunities emerged because he chose to prepare rather than surrender.

More opportunities open when we live in gratitude than when we live in bitterness. I once heard an analogy that when we hold onto anger, hatred, or other negative emotions, it is like holding glass chips and squeezing our hands into fists. Those emotions only wound our own progress. In fact, I think it was Struggle Jennings, who told me that line.

PRISONS OBLITERATE HOPE

Prison culture makes it easy to focus only on what is being lost. The system may constantly tell a person what he cannot do, what he no longer has, and what others think of him. Such an environment can make present circumstances feel permanent and unfair. When those thoughts become the only lens through which a person sees life, bitterness begins to grow. Once bitterness grows, it affects everything, weakening judgment, discipline, relationships, self-advocacy, preparation, ambition, and the ability to recognize opportunity.

A bitter person may still talk about goals, but bitterness drains energy from the effort required to pursue them. He may still speak about plans, but bitterness makes it harder to execute those plans consistently. He may still say he wants a better life, but bitterness often leads him to interpret every setback as proof that effort is pointless.

Living in gratitude, appreciative of blessings, can remind a person that even in confinement, he can still build or develop assets. He may not have freedom of movement, but he may still have freedom of thought. He may not control the institution, but he can still control how he uses his time and the gifts with which God has blessed him. He may not erase the conviction, but he can still build a record that shows growth, effort, and preparation.

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That shift in thinking leads to better strategies, and better strategies build confidence. With a plan, a person begins to focus on what he controls and has reason to keep building.

A person who learns to appreciate what remains becomes more capable of using what remains. He begins to think less like a victim of circumstances and more like the CEO of his life. He asks:

- » What is still available to me?
- » What can I build with the tools I have?
- » Who can I learn from?
- » How can I turn this difficult season into a period of preparation rather than waste?

Those questions strengthen a person.

BOOKS, MENTORS, AND DISCIPLINE

When I was in solitary confinement, books introduced me to leaders, thinkers, and builders who helped shape the way I understood success, responsibility, and self-development. Those books helped me define success, set goals, develop the right attitude, aspire to something more, take action, hold myself accountable, and strengthen awareness. In that way, appreciation was not separate from the earlier principles. It helped me recognize the sources that nourished them. I cannot take credit for developing the Straight-A Guide. I learned lessons from leaders and then modified those lessons to fit the predicament of imprisonment. I learned to appreciate the ideas that changed the way I think.

I also learned to appreciate the discipline adversity forced me to build. I hated being in prison. Yet the necessity of adjusting to hardship forced me to become more reflective, more strategic, more disciplined, and more intentional. I learned to think in longer time horizons. I learned to create order where little external order supported the future I wanted. I learned to use reading, writing, exercise, and introspection as tools for shaping identity rather than merely passing time. I am grateful for the lessons I learned, as they contributed to opportunities that later led to financial independence once I got out.

I am grateful that I get to do what I want with my time and resources, irrespective of whether anyone ever pays a penny for the services or resources I provide. The

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more I learned to appreciate what I had received, the more strongly I felt an obligation to use my life in service of others. That connection can show up in many ways:

- » A person who appreciates books should use what he learns.
- » A person who appreciates mentors should honor them through disciplined conduct.
- » A person who appreciates support should become more worthy of support.
- » A person who appreciates opportunities should use them to create something useful for others.

For that reason, we encourage all members of our community to develop a profile to show how they are preparing:

- » A biography can reflect gratitude for the lessons a person has learned and the people who helped him. It can show that he understands he did not reach his current level of growth by himself.
- » A journal can show daily recognition of progress, support, opportunities, and insights. It can reveal whether a person is moving through the day with resentment or with disciplined perspective.
- » A book report can show appreciation for authors and ideas that sharpened judgment. It can demonstrate that the person does not read merely to complete an assignment, but to learn from minds that expand his own.
- » A release plan can reflect gratitude for what has already been built and clarity about how the person intends to honor those opportunities moving forward. Gratitude strengthens responsibility. If a person recognizes the value of the opportunities ahead, he becomes more careful about preparing for them.

A broader profile can show that the person is not only tracking achievements, but also recognizing the lessons, relationships, and disciplines that made those achievements possible. He is showing that he has developed a personal plan, a system that will help him overcome the complexities and collateral consequences of a criminal charge. He can build a record to advance arguments that he is committed to living as a law-abiding, contributing citizen. Such a record may lead to income opportunities, and to more values-based decisions in the future.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. What do I still have that I should appreciate?
2. Who has helped me that I should acknowledge more openly?
3. What lesson or opportunity has emerged from hardship?
4. How can my writing show gratitude without becoming sentimental or per-

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formance oriented?

5. How can appreciation strengthen my relationships and my future?

6. In what ways has bitterness narrowed my perspective?

7. How can I recognize support, guidance, or opportunity more honestly in my profile and in daily life?

These questions help a person build a stronger way of carrying adversity. A person who learns to live with appreciation learns how to carry the past in a way that strengthens the future.



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