

STRAIGHT-A GUIDE

LESSON ELEVEN: APPRECIATION

In the previous lessons of this course, I explained how defining success gives direction, setting goals creates structure, choosing the right attitude sustains effort, aspiration keeps us moving forward, action turns intention into results, accountability measures progress, awareness helps us adapt, authenticity builds trust, and achievement compounds over time.

Appreciation sustains us, and keeps us moving in the right direction toward success. We should pass along the lessons we learn, sharing them with others in our community so that they, too, can build higher levels of liberty and fulfillment.

When we fail to show appreciation for the blessings that come into our life, success becomes fragile. Achievements feel empty. Progress loses meaning. Appreciation anchors us. It reminds us why the work matters and helps us endure setbacks without losing perspective.

APPRECIATION IS A DISCIPLINE, NOT A MOOD

On August 12, 2013, I concluded my obligation to the Federal Bureau of Prisons. From age 23 to 49, I lived as federal prisoner number 16377-004. Despite decades in confinement, I always felt grateful for opportunities that came my way.

Living in gratitude did not minimize the hardship of a lengthy sentence. It strengthened me, giving me a different perspective. Rather than perceiving the sentence my judge imposed as an injustice, I considered it part of the journey. My job would be to take what I was given, seize opportunities, and create a pathway to earn freedom, at the soonest possible time.

This lesson on “Appreciation,” the final lesson of the Straight-A Guide, does not suggest that circumstances are better than they are. Rather, we should recognize what remains possible, even in the worst conditions. Like ballast in a ship, appreciation stabilizes us when external forces threaten to capsize our progress. The Straight-A Guide concludes with this lesson on appreciation because more opportunities open when we live in gratitude. It restores confidence. People are more inclined to support progress than grievance, or those who live with a victim men-

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tality. If we develop a stronger mindset, people want to support our progress along the way.

FINDING GRATITUDE IN CONFINEMENT

After my arrest, a judge denied bail. Given that we were at the start of the war on drugs, authorities locked me in solitary confinement, where I spent my first year. I had never been incarcerated before. I did not know what to expect. After sentencing, authorities transferred me to a high-security penitentiary, where 40-foot walls surrounded the entire prison.

The environment felt ominous. Yet I appreciated the small things that I didn't previously have while in solitary:

- » I could walk outside.
- » I could look up and see a blue sky.
- » I could breathe fresh air.
- » I appreciated the increased liberty.

The books I read while in solitary helped me imagine a brighter future. I felt grateful that I could begin implementing a plan. The plan gave me confidence that, in time, it would lead to more success once I got out, after 26 years inside.

Appreciation, I learned, is like sunlight through prison bars. It does not remove the bars, but it reminds us that the world still exists beyond them.

GRATITUDE ON THE JOURNEY

Looking back, I can identify many blessings that sustained me through confinement:

- » My family stood by me consistently.
- » Reading the Bible gave me hope that redemption was possible.
- » Socrates taught me how to think differently.
- » Frederick Douglass showed me that learning to communicate could lead to meaningful contribution, even in captivity.
- » Mentors entered my life and pushed me to work harder.
- » Universities gave me opportunities to earn academic credentials.
- » My support network expanded, reconnecting me to the broader society.

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- » Publishing opportunities allowed me to contribute value beyond prison walls.
- » I married inside a prison visiting room, bringing love and stability into my life.
- » Opportunities to earn and manage resources helped me feel productive and responsible.

Those experiences made it easier to endure hardship. I came to accept that crises are part of life. Appreciation helped me remain grounded and prepared for whatever came next.

APPRECIATION EXPANDS OPPORTUNITY

Gratitude does more than improve attitude. It influences outcomes. When we live in gratitude, and remain appreciative of the blessings in our lives, we:
Attract support rather than sympathy.

Build resilience instead of resentment.

Remain open to opportunity instead of trapped in grievance.

Appreciation keeps us oriented toward growth. It is the emotional equivalent of compounding interest. The small acknowledgments, repeated daily, accumulate into perspective, strength, and opportunity.

A CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLE OF APPRECIATION UNDER PRESSURE

I've seen this principle at work in others as well. Consider the story of Ross Ulbricht.

Authorities arrested Ross on October 1, 2013, only months after I completed my sentence. He had created a website known as Silk Road. Prosecutors charged him with operating a Continuing Criminal Enterprise. It was the same statute under which I was convicted. A jury found him guilty, and a federal judge sentenced him to serve a double life sentence, plus 40 years.

Ross was in his late twenties when he received that sentence.

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Despite the severity of the term, Ross did not surrender to bitterness. He remained grateful for support. His mother and fiancée built a platform to advocate for him, and his resilience inspired more than 600,000 people to support his clemency petition.

On January 22, 2025, President Donald Trump granted Ross Ulbricht a full pardon. Some people call that luck. I believe it reflects something deeper. Ross lived with appreciation even when the system treated him harshly. That mindset sustained hope, attracted allies, and kept opportunity alive long enough for justice to arrive.

APPRECIATION COMPLETES THE STRAIGHT-A GUIDE

Appreciation does not mean settling. It means acknowledging progress while continuing to strive. When we live in gratitude and appreciate the blessings in our life:

- » Success remains grounded.
- » Failure becomes instructive.
- » Effort feels meaningful, even when results are delayed.

Appreciation closes the loop. It allows us to live with humility after achievement and resilience after loss.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING EXERCISE

Complete the following exercise in writing:

1. Identify three things you can genuinely appreciate in your current circumstances.
 - » These may relate to people, opportunities, abilities, or access to learning.
2. Explain how appreciation influences your motivation and outlook.
3. What does gratitude allow you to endure or pursue more effectively?
4. Write one way you will practice appreciation daily for the next week.
 - » This could be journaling, reflection, or expressing gratitude to someone who supports you.

At the end of the week, ask yourself:

5. Did appreciation improve my resilience?
6. Did it influence how others responded to me?
7. What opportunities became more visible as a result?

Appreciation does not end the journey. It gives the journey meaning.

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