

## **LESSON 5: ACHIEVEMENT AND APPRECIATION**

### **Celebrate Success**

### **ANNOTATION: ACHIEVEMENT AND APPRECIATION**

To stay motivated as days turn into weeks, weeks turn into months, and months turn into years, we must learn to celebrate the small achievements. Daily achievements put us into a position of new opportunities that we can seize or create. Simultaneously, we must learn to appreciate the blessings that come our way. Even after a lengthy prison term, we can appreciate opportunities to contribute to society.

### **PURPLE COW:**

Seth Godin authors books for people who want to market goods and services to consumers. One of his books encourages people to think different—and to think differently—about how they message.

Incidentally, since developing communication skills is an integral component of this self-directed course, write the phrase “thinking different” and “thinking differently” in two separate sentences.

He used an analogy of cows in a pasture.

People don’t pay much attention when they drive down the road and see cows grazing in a pasture. Yet they would pause for a second look if they saw a purple cow in the field. The purple cow might captivate their attention.

Marketing, according to Seth Godin, is about grabbing people’s attention.

That book gave me a new perspective on how I fit into a prison setting from the perspective of many staff members. Like everyone serving time in the penitentiary, I wore khaki clothing. In their eyes, every person in prison merited about as much thought as a cow in a pasture.



Instead of recognizing our common humanity, many staff members viewed me as registration number 16377-004. Unless I did something to differentiate myself, my past bad decisions would always define my life.

I may have considered myself an individual, but to stakeholders, there wasn't anything remarkable about me or my predicament. People in my inner circle may have cared about the sentence I served, but people tasked with carrying out my sentence wouldn't care about my future. To them, I was a cog in a bureaucratic machine that they had to keep going.

The transfer from detention centers in Seattle took me through a transit center in Oklahoma, followed by a few weeks as a holdover in an Alabama federal prison.

When I got to the penitentiary where I would serve my sentence, I heard dubious advice from hundreds of people who had served time. From coast to coast, people with experience living in jails and prisons told me that forgetting about the world outside and focusing on time inside would be the best adjustment strategy.

After a month in the penitentiary, a Case Manager scheduled me for my Initial Classification—also known as a team meeting. The staff members reviewed my file and advised that my projected release date would be August 2013, so long as I did not lose any credit for disciplinary infractions. I would have to serve another 25 years before the system would release me.

When the Unit Manager asked if I had any questions, I inquired whether it would be possible to transfer to one of the lower-security Federal Correctional Institutions that I had heard about from others.

“You have a greatest-severity drug offense, and a 45-year sentence,” he said. “You should expect to serve your entire term inside high-security penitentiaries.”

To members of my Unit Team, the bad decisions that put me in prison defined me. Similarly, other people in prison had their views on how a person should serve a sentence. Fortunately, Socrates, Frederick Douglass, and Nelson Mandela inspired me to engineer a personal release plan. They convinced me to emulate the adjustment strategies of people that transformed their lives while living in struggle.



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I detested every part of living in prison. Reading about leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi taught me that I should “strive to be the change that I want to see in the world.” In his commitment to liberating India from tyranny, he pledged to keep everything he said, thought, and did in harmony. That guidance seemed far more prudent than the messages I received inside the penitentiary.

If I wanted others to look beyond my criminal past and perceive me as being different from the herd, I needed to adjust differently. I would need to become the change that I wanted to see in the world. I could find a path by reading about leaders from all segments in society. Since those leaders taught me, I feel responsible for passing that message to others.

Some participants may have read the biography of Elon Musk, a remarkable businessman who has created jobs for more than 100,000 people. People know him as the founder of successful companies, including Tesla, PayPal, Space X, and many others.

Yet Elon Musk didn’t begin his life as a titan of industry.

As a young and impoverished college student, Mr. Musk immigrated to North America from South Africa. Wanting to accelerate his pathway to success, he wrote unsolicited letters to leaders from whom he believed he could learn. That tactic of writing opened opportunities for him to build relationships with business leaders, including the CEO of one of the largest banks in the world. The banker became so impressed with the teenage Musk that he offered him a summer internship.

That same strategy of writing unsolicited letters helped me transcend prison boundaries to build relationships with leaders who would become mentors that catapulted my journey to advocacy.

### **TAKE TEN MINUTES (5-1):**

Write responses to the following questions in approximately ten minutes. If participating in a class setting, discuss verbally.



5-1: In what ways would staff view you differently from other people in prison?

5-2: How can you bring mentors into your orbit?

5-3: In what way would finding mentors lead to greater achievements in your life?

## **INCREMENTAL ACHIEVEMENTS AND THE OTHER SIDE:**

What does the other side of a prison term look like?

Participants working through this course serve sentences in detention centers, jails, or prisons. As someone who spent his 20s, 30s, and 40s in those environments, I encourage participants to remember a maxim of this introductory course:

It's never too early and never too late to begin preparing for success after prison.

Start by thinking about the other side. Statistics show that most justice-impacted people face monumental challenges when they leave prison. The irony of corrections is that recidivism rates in many jurisdictions show that seven out of every ten people in jail or prison return to custody after release. As people spend more time in a “correctional” setting, they become less likely to function as law-abiding, contributing citizens.

People can speculate and draw conclusions about the reasons behind those dismal success rates. Rather than dwelling on the reasons behind failure, I always encourage participants to think about success. Regardless of where participants begin working through this course, I hope they will architect a release plan. That plan should lead them to where they want to go, and the legacy they want to leave society after they're gone.

For example:

- » Socrates lived more than 2,500 years ago—yet his leadership and teachings still influence people today.
- » Frederick Douglass died in 1891, but through the books he wrote, and others wrote about him, we see an example of excellence in advocacy for good.



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- » Viktor Frankl did not allow the losses he suffered in a concentration camp to stop him from bringing change to the world, even though he died decades ago.
- » Nelson Mandela died in 2013, and others have written volumes about his leadership, despite the 27 years he served in prison.

Those people left legacies that people revere, despite the time they spent in bondage.

My life is different today because of the incremental achievements that began inside of that high-security penitentiary, back in 1987. I can still trace the steps:

While I languished in a solitary cell, Officer Wilson gave me a series of books that taught me about Socrates, Frederick Douglass, Nelson Mandela, and others. From those books I learned to stop thinking about my problems and to start thinking about how I could reconcile with society from inside of a prison cell.

Frederick Douglass' story inspired me to develop communication skills. If I worked to become a better writer and better speaker, I hoped to persuade leaders that we should reform opportunities for people in prison to earn freedom.

Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Viktor Frankl, and many other leaders showed the path to succeed as an advocate. Besides developing skills, a person had to develop relationships.

Every achievement begins with incremental steps. Some of those steps will be harder than others, but people who commit know that each step should lead to an intended destination.

When I started my path inside a solitary cell before my judge inflicted a lengthy sentence, I visualized the life I'm leading right now—working to improve outcomes for all justice-impacted people.

A conversation with Lynn Stephens helped me along that path. She supervised the business office of the prison's factory. When I applied for a job, she asked why I wanted to work in the business office. The initial meeting with the Unit Team convinced me that I needed a plan to write the next chapter of my life. I told Lynn that I wanted to find a quiet spot where I could avoid the volatility of the penitentiary and work on a release plan



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that I could use to pry open opportunities and prepare for success upon release from prison.

The more I spoke with her about my release plan and preparing for success after release, even though I had only begun to serve a sentence that would keep me confined for multiple decades, the more I could see her perceptions of me change. From the release plan, she could question me and see the deliberateness of every step I took.

Engineering that release plan became the first step toward becoming a purple cow.

Lynn authorized me to work as her clerk. She tacitly allowed me to complete my schoolwork after I finished my office duties. Because of her support, I earned an undergraduate degree. Independent study and correspondence courses taught lessons that opened new opportunities.

As Jim Collins wrote in *Good to Great*, the most onerous part of success is getting started. But momentum builds.

With Lynn's trust, new opportunities for growth opened. Looking for sanctuary from the asylum, I found a niche by volunteering for a suicide-watch program through the psychology department. When the shift in the business office concluded, I sat in a quiet area of the prison's mental health unit. In that niche, I had the solitude I would need to concentrate on my studies. While on the suicide-watch shift, I could write to prospective mentors.

I began writing letters using the same strategy that persuaded a university to admit me as a correspondence student and the same approach that Elon Musk used to network when he immigrated to North America. If an article or a book inspired me, I'd introduce myself by writing a letter. Typically, at that early stage of my journey, I wrote to professors who published books or articles about the prison system.

Those scholars didn't know me from anyone else, but I doubt they received many letters from people serving time in prison. Ironically, being in prison may have been an advantage in my efforts to connect with them. Through those efforts, I connected me with professors at Princeton, Harvard, Stanford, Yale, Hofstra, and other great universities. I considered



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each new relationship a monumental achievement and an incremental step in my release plan.

Those professors visited me in prison. As they got to know me, they invited me to publish articles in their books about prison. Some invited me to write chapters for them. As time passed, they introduced me to their publishers, which led to publishing contracts to publish books I wrote.

The takeaway?

Had I not taken incremental steps during the earliest stages of my confinement, I would not have been able to seize or create opportunities that advanced my release plan.

## TAKE TEN MINUTES (5-2):

Write responses to the following questions in approximately ten minutes. If participating in a class setting, discuss verbally.

5-4: In what ways will the incremental step of completing this introductory course influence your adjustment?

5-5: In what ways would finding mentors that align with your release plan lead to new opportunities and achievements?

5-6: How can you show appreciation for the opportunities that others are opening for you?

Along the way, relationships opened that directly related to the reasons I'm now able to bring courses into state and federal prison systems. The next phase of our course will include more details that show the trajectory. For the complete story, participants might consider reading the following books:

## Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term

- » Details showing the pathway from an arrest on August 11, 1987 to a release date on August 12, 2013.



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## **Prison my 8,344th Day**

- » Details on the deliberate, intentional decisions during a typical day in prison.

## **Success after Prison**

- » Opportunities that opened after release, largely because of the deliberate release plan.

## **Perseverance**

- » Strategies to build momentum while working through a lengthy prison term.

## **Release Plan**

- » Best practices for creating an initial release plan and working to develop the plan over time.

## **DVD video series**

Video profiles of others who built pathways to success after prison. Each video shows the relationship between prison decisions and success after release. Staff members may offer those DVD videos in libraries, reentry centers, or broadcast them over institutional televisions.

Creating those assets contributed to contracting opportunities with different prison systems, including the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the California Department of Corrections, and other institutions.

The arc included an apex, like my marriage inside a prison visiting room during my 16th year, and nadirs, like transfers to prisons across state lines and many stints in the Special Housing Unit of prisons where I served time. Each step along the way represented a part of my release plan.

On a path of preparing for success after prison, I learned the power of alchemy—converting adversaries into advocates. Indeed, while locked



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in a cell the Special Housing Unit at the federal prison in Lompoc, I met Captain Matevousian. An officer cited me with a disciplinary infraction for publishing a manuscript, which brought me to the attention the prison's head of security.

Since I'd already served longer than 20 years and had created an elaborate release plan, I knew the system well—perhaps too well. Despite prevailing over the incident report, Captain Matevousian told me that he didn't want a person on the compound who about the need for prison reform. Based on his recommendation, administrators shipped me to another federal prison.

Publishing books represented an integral component of my release plan. Each time I held a book in my hand, I felt like I was taking another step toward my eventual career in advocacy. I believed those books would advance my commitment to being the change I wanted to see. Despite my goals, administrators viewed my publishing as a potential threat to the institution's security.

Socrates taught me that, to succeed, I had to understand the world in which I lived. Like anyone else who wanted to overcome a challenge, I had to introspect on questions:

- » What strengths did I have?
- » What weaknesses?
- » What opportunities existed?
- » What threatened my progress?

Since my release plan showed what I wanted, I expected to face obstacles. Preparing for success means learning to be comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Working toward prison reform required resources I could leverage to build an ecosystem for change. Leaders helped me along the way. To show my appreciation for what they taught, I had to live in gratitude—passing along the lessons that had made a difference in my adjustment.

Those incremental steps across the highwire of imprisonment opened new opportunities when I transitioned to a halfway house on August 13, 2012. Within days, I closed a deal with a real estate developer to acquire my first property, and San Francisco State University invited me to teach



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as an adjunct professor. I created “The Architecture of Incarceration,” a course for students who wanted to build a career in the corrections sector.

A tri-part adjustment pattern of focusing on earning academic credentials, contributing to society, and building a support network carried me through prison. Similarly, I would need a tri-part plan to succeed upon release.

Despite feeling passionate about prison reform, I also had to cover living expenses and prepare for retirement. Those needs influenced the intentional, three-pronged career in business, investments, and academia that I launched. Each component of the plan related to the other:

By building or accumulating appreciating assets, in appreciating markets, I could prepare for my retirement.

By building businesses, I could earn a living that would fund my ministry to improve outcomes for all justice-impacted people.

By working in academia, I could infuse future prison leaders with new ideas that, I believed, would improve outcomes. We could change the way leaders measured justice in America. Instead of waiting for calendar pages to turn, my scholarship advanced ideas for reforms that would incentivize people to work toward earning freedom through merit.

As a professor, I expanded my platform, publishing articles like “Incentivizing Excellence” in the UC Hastings Law Review. By publishing in a law review, I took an incremental step toward building a speaking career that would spawn innovative ideas to a cynical crowd. I spread ideas on the need to empower the Bureau of Prisons with incentives. If we want people to leave prison as productive citizens, we should empower administrators to reward people who pursue that path.

Those writings led to an invitation to keynote an event that the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals sponsored. For 40 minutes, while a group of several hundred judges and correctional practitioners ate lunch, I promoted the idea of reforms that would include incentives to produce the outcomes we wanted from America’s criminal justice system.

Following my presentation, a well-dressed man in a blue suit approached. He extended his hand and asked if I remembered him.



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“Of course I remember you,” I smiled. “You’re Captain Matevousian. Five years ago, when I was in Lompoc, you locked me in the SHU for advancing the ideas I spoke about today.”

While we shook hands, Mr. Matevousian told me his career had advanced. The agency promoted him to Warden, and he presided over the penitentiary in Atwater. He invited me to give a presentation in his institution.

Instead of making a motivational speech, I proposed to create a course that would show people in prison how they could begin making decisions that prepare them for success upon release.

That conversation spread the program through the Bureau of Prisons and several state prison systems. It led to the birth of Prison Professors, a website I created to help all stakeholders of the system, including all justice-impacted people. More importantly, it allowed me to work with many leaders, influencing their ideas on reforms that included the First Step Act—the most comprehensive and innovative prison-reform legislation since the 1984 Comprehensive Crime Control Act.

The First Step Act passed Congress with bipartisan support, beginning a transition from an indeterminate to a determinate sentencing system. It’s an incremental step toward more reforms that our team at Prison Professors will continue working to advance.

Our advocacy pushes to advance ideas such as:

Broader application of incentives with the First Step Act, so that all people in federal prison would qualify for Earned Time Credits.

Use of additional incentives, such as extended furloughs and quasi work-release programs for people who have built release plans showing their commitment to earning incrementally higher levels of freedom.

Clear pathways to work toward consideration for commutations of sentence, or compassionate release.

Reinstatement of the U.S. Parole Commission.

Some people may believe such changes will never happen. I urge those people to consider stories like Halim Flowers, or Tommy Walker. Those people worked hard to build extraordinary and compelling records long before the First Step Act became law.



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Other people get discouraged because they will finish serving their sentence before Congress or the agency implements changes for which we advocate.

We must celebrate each small, incremental achievement along the way. We grow stronger when we live in gratitude, showing appreciation for the blessings that come our way.

I appreciate each participant in this course. Through their work, I open more opportunities to convince cynical people on the need for reforms that will improve outcomes of our nation's prison system.

### **TAKE TEN MINUTES (5-3):**

Write responses to the following questions in approximately ten minutes. If participating in a class setting, discuss verbally.

5-7: How does the release plan you're creating show a series of incremental steps to prepare for success after prison?

5-8: In what way would a small achievement open opportunity in your life?

5-9: How would living in gratitude influence your adversaries?

