

# FORUM

## Life's free prizes



**Nigel Alston**  
Motivational Moments

*"Man's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions."*

— Oliver Wendell Holmes

I have been thinking about free prizes lately — the rewards, accolades, honors, etc., that don't cost you anything like the toy surprise promised by the "free prize inside" statement on a box of Cracker Jacks. You know it's in the box, yet, you don't know what it is, hence a pleasant surprise.

Imagine if your life was like a box of Cracker Jacks. Instead of a box filled with caramel coated popcorn and peanuts, your life is filled with daily experiences, planned and unplanned, good and not so good. Like that box of Cracker Jacks, though, your life has a "free prize inside" each day you live, an extra benefit.

I have been writing down what I consider to be some of those extra benefits that don't cost me anything — in other words, my free prizes.

The inspiration to do this came as a result of reading "What is the Free Prize?" post-

ed by Seth Godin on his Blog at <http://sethgodin.typepad.com/> about the next BIG marketing idea. Godin has an interesting way of looking at things and is great at selling ideas. He stretches your mind.

My free prize is applying his marketing belief to my daily observations, intentionally looking for the unexpected benefits (free prizes) derived from daily living and life's journey.

Godin is an entrepreneur, a sought-after lecturer, a monthly columnist for Fast Company, and an all-around business gadfly, according to a description promoting his latest book, "Free Prize Inside: The Next BIG Marketing Idea." He's the best-selling author of "Permission Marketing," "Unleashing the Ideavirus," "The Big Red Fez," "Survival Is Not Enough," and "Purple Cow."

Godin's examples and illustrations of "free prizes" sparked my exercise in thinking about, realizing, appreciating and writing down my own list of free prizes.

According to Godin, the "free prize" is the experience of service at the Ritz Carlton, when what you paid for was a good night's sleep; the look on the face of the valet when you drive up in a Hummer (I had had that experience recently too, the 'look' IS the free

prize!); the way it smells inside a bakery; the line to get onto Space Mountain; and the way you can pack cigarettes against the side of the package before you smoke them.

His book "Free Prize Inside," according to its description, is full of "practical advice on how to put Purple Cow thinking (visit his Web site and find out what this is) to work inside your organization (big or small, profit or non) to MAKE SOMETHING HAPPEN."

What if you could enjoy life more by recognizing and appreciating the free prizes packed inside each day?

The free prize is an appreciation for life and what people remember about you when your time is up on this earth. That thought was prompted by attending a funeral recently and listening to a description of the life the deceased had lived. The free prize is what people discover about themselves as a result of personal development and growth and being as excited as they are about the discovery. It's the aha! The free prize is the happiness others feel for you and express to you when you are being recognized.

The free prize is engaging in an enjoyable and refreshing conversation with a friend for hours, after an impromptu meeting in a bookstore, when

you went in for a cup of coffee and a few minutes to unwind after a busy week. It was unexpected yet thought-provoking. The free prize is a child telling you that you are her favorite author when you went to her school to talk to her first-grade class about writing.

The free prize is not knowing what song you will hear next when you select shuffle as your random mode to listen to music on your Ipod. The free prize is the excitement from the discussion and interaction with one another during Bible study. The free prize is the look of surprise on the face of the person behind you at K&W and the appreciation exhibited when you pay for his or her meal, including the cashier.

Godin knows something about marketing. A limited edition of his new book will be published in May 2004 in a collectible cereal box labeled "Free Prize Inside!" I can't wait to get my copy. I know there are more ideas packed inside that box that apply not only to marketing but life as well.

What's the "free prize" inside your life today?

*Nigel Alston is a radio talk-show host, columnist and motivational speaker. Visit his Web site at [www.motivational-moments.com](http://www.motivational-moments.com).*

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## Repeal mandatory minimum sentences



**Ron Walters**  
Guest Columnist

I am often asked what is the black agenda for the 2004 elections and what issues should we be asking the candidates to pay attention to. High on the list is the repeal of mandatory minimum sentences.

I was watching a hearing of the House of Representatives subcommittee on appropriations on the needs of the Supreme Court. It was chaired by Virginia Rep. Frank Wolf and featured Justices Anthony Kennedy and Clarence Thomas. I was noting that there seemed to be a division of labor between the two justices. Thomas apparently was sent there to testify about the administrative and technological needs of the high court, while Kennedy explained staffing needs and other issues.

Well, they were talking about their respective issues when Wolf asked Kennedy about his pursuit of eliminating mandatory minimums. I was startled at the passion with which Kennedy plowed into the subject, stating that the United States now incarcerates people at eight times more than any industrial country in the world and that 55 percent of those in the federal system are there for petty drug offenses.

Kennedy plowed on, saying that such sentences were "unfair, unjust and unwise..." and that the guidelines were put into place at a time when politicians were trying to outdo one another being "tough on crime." The goal was to give everybody the same sentence since it was thought that no one actually served the sentences meted out by the courts, so long sentences would be a deterrent.



Kennedy also suggested that the sentencing has been too expensive. In California, they were spending \$26,000 on inmates locked up for this purpose and spending just \$6,000 on education per child at the level of elementary education.

Wolf struck back, saying that we are becoming a violent society and that he would be for possibly adjusting the sentences for non-violent offenders, but not for violent ones. For example, he talked about taking the money used to incarcerate offenders and putting it into drug rehabilitation programs and if people violated their drug rehabilitation program, then they would do time — or some other such formulation.

Kennedy shot back with the thought that supervised release has been found to be 40 percent more effective and cheaper than having someone in full-time custody and that since the court system has to spend more money to allocate resources for mandatory minimums, we are not doing a

good job. Kennedy ended his passionate charge to the conservative lawmakers in front of him by praising the courage of justices who served lower level courts that were not following the minimum guidelines.

Today, there is a group called Families Against Mandatory Minimum Sentences that has grown up to confront and repeal this pernicious law. The hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons has been waging a campaign in New York City to bring heat and light to the opposition to this issue. But I have not seen the rest of our leadership out front on this issue that, more than any other, has contributed to locking up an entire generation of black youths who are targeted and punished at a greater rate than whites.

These young people have become caught up in a nasty period of ideological fervor where white males had to prove that they in fact controlled society by fashioning a set of laws in the 1994 Omnibus Crime Bill. It has had a

disastrous effect on our community, even at a time when crime has been going down. So, even though 6,000 of them will be coming out this year, most will not be eligible for public housing, student loans and other public goods that will enable them to get a fresh start in society.

President Bush adopted a program created by Jesse Jackson that proposes to put churches in a relationship to those coming of prison to make their transition easier. But nothing would make it easier than to eliminate those punishment laws that make it tough for them to get a new start and easier for them to consider giving up and going back to the old ways. In fact, Bush ought to make it harder for them to get in, rather than easier to get out, but impossible to get on with their lives.

The black leadership has said a lot about getting convicted felons to vote, but not much about getting them a life and we are giving the politicians a pass on this issue. For example, if you go to John Kerry's Web site, there is a list of issues, but nothing about the repeal of mandatory minimums — or any other criminal justice issue. Democrats have also played the game of being "tough on crime" to stay viable in the race for votes. But it is time to know where Kerry stands (we know where Bush stands) on this issue.

Justice Clarence Thomas said not a mumbling word at the hearing, but Kennedy and his colleague Justice Steven Breyer are fighting hard. We should join them.

*Ron Walters is the Distinguished Leadership Scholar, director of the African American Leadership Institute in the Academy of Leadership and professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland-College Park. His latest book is "White Nationalism, Black Interests" (Wayne State University Press).*

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