

at my community theater work as a 'hobby,' because I convinced myself it was never appropriate to settle for something so 'low' in the world of acting as that kind of work." She slaps her forehead and says, "What a horrible prejudice I've had!" She says this last sentence so loud that a number of participants are startled out of whatever reverie they were in. "Community theater is my love and passion. I have no interest at all in moving from here to New York and trying to become a famous actress. I want my life's work to be my involvement in community theater."

To my surprise, she stands up. "I'm gonna go for it!" she proclaims. I almost think she is going to run from the room and go straight to her investment banker boss, tell him she quits, and then scoot directly to the community theater group. But then she seems to realize that it is 10 P.M., too late to make much more headway tonight. Still standing, she looks around at us, wondering if she has anything to be embarrassed about. She sits back down, smooths the folds in her dress, and then, in her best Scarlett O'Hara impersonation, says, "After all, tomorrow is another day!"

BROTHER, CAN YOU SPARE A CELL?

Where am I stuck?

Is this another way of asking, What, if anything, are my prisons?

What if you're in a prison from which you don't want to escape?

Jean-Paul Sartre, the famous existentialist philosopher, novelist, playwright, and social critic, maintained in *Being and Nothingness* that we are "condemned to be free." Sartre believed the lot of

humankind to be one of limitless freedom. A witness to the tragedies of World War II (Sartre himself was briefly captured by the Germans), he surely knew of the many obstacles to human freedom; nonetheless, he felt that as conscious beings, we are always free to try to change our situation. He wrote that we are "thrown" into a world that has no rules or structure other than those which we choose to give it. There are people who "want to be massive and impenetrable" and who "never seek but that which one has already found." But according to Sartre, those with the temerity to shun convention and make free choices in their search for self are "authentic," while those who conform to roles dictated by society and recoil at their unfettered freedom are practicing "bad faith."

One of my best friends, in his mid-forties, longs to travel, to be a writer and photographer, to learn languages. "Why don't you seize the day and go for it?" I exhort him.

"I can't," he says. He shrugs. "Hey, my life is over."

What unnerves me the most is the look on his face when he says this. It is not one of despair or disappointment or even resignation. It is a look of relief. He seems to take pleasure in convincing himself that he can't move one centimeter forward in the direction of his dreams.

He is the picture of health, financially secure, extremely intelligent. Yet he has erected a prison for himself. I try gently to chip away at it. I tell him that it's not too late to realize his dreams, that, for instance, Alex Haley, the author of *Roots*, didn't even make the attempt to become a professional writer until middle age, when he had retired from the Coast Guard. He looks at me with a blank expression. I think he knows what I'm trying to get across to him, but he doesn't want to let it seep in. He's built an impermeable, albeit invisible, barrier around himself. He'd rather stay with the "my life is over" spiel. I try to give him a "get out of

jail free" card. But nothing doing. He prefers his all-too-comfy, custom-made prison.

Sitting in a cell nearby is another friend of mine, a lawyer in West Virginia. He's an excellent lawyer and at a young age has already made quite a name for himself in his neck of the woods. The problem is, as he's confided to me on a number of occasions, he hates being a lawyer. He wants to quit his despised profession and become an anthropology professor. He is still young, single, debt-free. "What's stopping you?" I ask.

"I'm locked in," he laments, swishing the swivel stick within his tumbler of bourbon on the rocks. "In two more years I'll be vested. I'll be a partner."

"But . . . you don't want to be a lawyer," I say. "Why spend two more years in the firm until you're vested? By then you'll be locked in even more."

He studies me. He takes a good long swallow of his bourbon. He puts his tumbler down and he looks somewhere past my shoulder. His lips are moving. He seems to be having a conversation with himself. Finally he looks at me and says, "Do you think I'm crazy?"

I look at him quizzically.

"I'd be crazy to leave at this point and start all over again." His angry eyes are tearing.

Part of his job is to represent the city in prosecuting criminals. He has an exceptionally high conviction rate. He's so good that he's even managed to convict himself, to a life he despises, without parole.

Can your emotions be prisons?

Many modern philosophers think it's a commonplace that emotion is the opposite of reason and hinders a person's ability to

be objective. Søren Kierkegaard argued that, to the contrary, the most insightful knowledge springs from, and is the fruit of, an intense and impassioned emotional outpouring.

But some emotions can be paralyzing and debilitating. Walter Kaufmann noted that you can live in the grip of resentment, jealousy, hate, fear, or grief, and that to this day many deem it virtually impossible to transcend such emotions. "Yet philosophers have long recognized that this widespread notion is false," Kaufmann wrote, "and Socrates, the Stoics and Epicureans, and Spinoza are among those who have tried to teach humanity how to emancipate itself from this bondage through self-understanding, which Kaufmann says is "self-transcendence." . . . It changes one's life." But I think there are many types of self-understanding, and not all of them are of the liberating type that leads a person to make positive life changes. You may understand why you are oppressed, why you have paralyzing fears, why you habitually procrastinate; but if you don't know how to go about improving your circumstances, then the self-understanding you've gained may lead you to feel more in bondage, more paralyzed by fear or oppression, than ever.

In all fairness to Kaufmann, I think the self-understanding of which he speaks is an emancipating type. Consider the method of questioning he espouses in order to overcome such debilitating emotions as resentment, which is one of the most constricting prisons:

One can ask oneself for a start: Am I free of resentment? And if not, what do I resent? What precisely? And how rational is it that I . . . resent this but not that? Never mind at that point whether you think that you can let go. Just ask yourself whether you might be better off if you did, and whether you would like yourself better. Think of alternatives, using your imagination.

You need no analyst to do that; you can do it though it is not at all easy. What is then harder, of course, is then going on to shed resentment . . . ; but that, too, can be done even if it should take some time.

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Kaufmann's method of questioning doesn't leave you dangling after you answer some aspect of "Who am I?" but requires that you "think of alternatives, using your imagination," and then commit to changing those aspects of yourself that keep you from being the person you aspire to be.

Richard Tarnas wrote that Socrates, through his words and deeds, "embodied an abiding conviction that the act of rational self-criticism could free the human mind from the bondage of false opinion." The method Socrates used to set his mind free is available to anyone, at anytime, in any place.

You may want to ask yourself sometime: What are my prisons? Are some of my prisons good and even necessary? Are others constricting and even debilitating? Are there ways to fortify the good prisons while at the same time ridding myself of others?

What kind of place is a prison—of the federal type?

Immanuel Kant strongly endorsed the prison system and the penalization of criminals. For instance, Kant said reason dictated that thieves be sentenced to forced labor in prisons: "A person who steals makes everybody else's property insecure; so in effect he ends up robbing himself . . . of the security of all possible property; he does not have anything and cannot acquire anything, but he still wants to live, though this is not possible unless others feed him. But since the state will not do this for nothing, he has to put his powers at the disposal of the state for whatever labor it deems fit. . . ."

Nearly a century later, the French philosopher, historian, and

social critic Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, maintained that prisons only serve to harden and perfect the professional criminal. Foucault challenged the widely held assumption that the advent of the prison system was a progressive and humane development. He argued that, to the contrary, it was a disturbing sign of increasing social and political control. Foucault said that the purpose of modern penitentiaries was similar to that of modern asylums—namely, to separate "abnormal" or "deviant" individuals from the so-called normal ones within society at large. Foucault further asserted that modern society, in which rigid regimentation and conformity are cardinal virtues, was itself becoming more and more like a prison. "Is it surprising that . . . factories, schools, barracks, hospitals . . . all resemble prisons?" he asked.

Unlike Kant, Foucault studied comprehensively the actual conditions in prisons and juxtaposed his account with his considered perspective on the state of society. Only then did he come to his reasoned conclusions about both prisons and society. Nonetheless, as compelling as I and countless others might find his insights, they are no more the last word than are Kant's. Though Foucault's conclusions may well hold true in many or even most cases, I do not think they are universally true. I think there are many individual exceptions that have shown that prisons can be, among many other things, liberating places.

The Austrian-born philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein is said to have used the time he spent in an Italian prison camp during World War I to develop more fully his thoughts on the foundations of logic and mathematics and complete his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. It turned out to be the only work published in his lifetime, and it precipitated a revolution in philosophy. This landmark work, which emphasized the importance of the study of language, led to his becoming one of the most influential

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philosophers of the century and to the development of several important fields of philosophy: logical positivism, which applies the principles of logic, mathematics, and empirical science to virtually every field of thought; linguistic analysis, which aims to examine and clarify the many uses of language; and semantics, the study of the meaning of words, and the relationship of signs to the objects they denote.

The stories are legion about people who have taken advantage of the time they spent behind bars to free their minds, escaping from the mental shackles that in turn, upon their release from prison, enabled them to escape their harsh environment.

The civil rights leader Malcolm X, for instance, emerged from his time spent in prison, where he converted to the Muslim faith, a changed man—in many ways a *new* man. He had nurtured almost incomparable critical and creative thinking skills from his disciplined and voluminous reading while behind bars. In his autobiography, he recounts how he poured over countless works of philosophy and came to conclude that “most Occidental philosophy had largely been borrowed from the Oriental thinkers. Socrates, for instance, traveled in Egypt. . . . Obviously [he] got some of his wisdom from the East’s wise men.”

In prison, he literally transcended his former self and became for me and countless others a paradigm of an autonomous person who succeeded in bridging racial and cultural divides. He was the epitome of a person who managed to free himself of very justifiable resentment—one of the most rigid and confining prisons of all—to realize his aspirations. What he accomplished is even more admirable when one considers that from the first moment he was brought into this world, he faced inordinately oppressive circumstances, and was raised in the midst of a society that bred and fomented inequality and racial animosity. Just as he learned from reading about the lives of those who had made dramatic

self-transformations, by his example, Malcolm X in his own right became a beacon to all who believe that you change the world by changing yourself. Few people seem to have completely freed themselves of resentment—one of the most constraining prisons of all—as Malcolm X.

In later years, he said he “often reflected on the new vistas that reading opened to me. I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life. As I see it today, the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive.” To be sure, he couldn’t know everything, didn’t learn everything, before he was assassinated. But he was forever open to new opportunities to learn and think and question in new ways, and like few others, he took for his own the difficult and exhilarating and unending challenge of setting himself free.

We might let him inspire us to break out of an endless series of cells.

A WISE PLACE

It is late afternoon and raining heavily as I arrive at a medium-security prison in Northern California. The old and unadorned yellow brick facility is wedged in a narrow valley on the outskirts of a congested suburb. I pass through a number of checkpoints at the prison before I finally enter the large gymnasium-like room where I am to facilitate Socrates Café. The prison official who arranged for my visit is there to greet me. She had earlier told me that about twenty inmates would take part. That seemed to me an ideal size. But she now tells me that sixty inmates are inside waiting for Socrates Café to get under way. I have to struggle to quell the anxiety welling up inside me. Would I be able to facilitate a

worthwhile dialogue with so many taking part? Should I just turn tail and bolt out of there? It had taken months to get permission to hold a Socrates Café with the prisoners. It had taken letters and phone calls and finally a meeting with prison officials, and at last a firm date was scheduled. I can't leave now.

But I wonder whether this will be an exercise in futility. A friend who'd once held "group dynamics" discussions with inmates had told me it was his experience that they wouldn't reveal anything intimate about themselves because of fears they'd lose face or lose their stature with their fellow inmates. "They'll never engage in the kind of discussion you hold in the outside world" was his pessimistic prognosis.

When I walk into the meeting room, an inmate, a burly man with a craggy and careworn face, comes up to me and says, "What's the weather like out there?"

"It's pretty miserable," I tell him.

"I'd still rather be out there than in here," he says, and sort of smiles.

"My name's Wolf," he says. We shake hands. Then he says, "Have you ever heard that saying, 'Man is a wolf to man'?"

I say I have. "I don't think that's true," he says. "I think that saying gives wolves a bad rap. If man hurts his fellow man, we shouldn't go around saying that he acts like a wolf. Wolves are noble animals, unlike man."

Then a very tall, striking black man with a neatly trimmed beard and a piercing gaze introduces himself. His name is John. He obviously wants to ask me something but he seems shy, hesitant. Finally he says, "I hope this doesn't sound stupid, but I was wondering . . ." He pauses some more, as if thinking how best to say what he wants to say. Then he asks, "Isn't philosophy really the study of 'why'?"

"That sounds like a wonderful definition of philosophy," I reply.

All of the other inmates—garbed in loose-fitting pajama-like orange pants, short-sleeved shirts and slippers—are already seated on metal stools along a number of large rectangular benches. The benches and stools are bolted to the floor, a precautionary measure to keep the inmates from throwing the seats and benches at one another. Armed guards are stationed all around the perimeter of the high-ceilinged, windowless room.

Most inmates are drinking coffee. A few have their heads down on the table and seem asleep. But most seem at least a little curious about what is about to take place. I wonder how I can keep the conversation from becoming unwieldy, how I can further this quest of mine to better enable me and others, wherever and whoever they might be, to seek Socrates. I am introduced to the inmates as "a philosophy teacher." I quickly correct that. "I'm a philosopher, and I do facilitate philosophy discussions," I say to the group, "but I don't consider myself a teacher in the traditional sense of the word. I have every expectation at every Socrates Café that I'll learn much more from the other participants than they could ever learn from me."

I then talk a little bit about how I felt that I'd lived certain stretches of my adult life in a kind of intellectual and emotional wasteland. I talk about how at a certain crossroads in my life I'd been moved by the words of Socrates that "the unexamined life is not worth living," and how my renewed "communion" with Socrates reawakened and rekindled my sense of the possibilities of "applying" the method of philosophical inquiry practiced by Socrates in my life and perhaps in the lives of others. I don't seem to know how to quit talking. I don't even seem to know why I'm saying what I'm saying. Fortunately an inmate raises his hand to interrupt me. It is Wolf. "What does philosophy mean?" he asks.

"The original Hellenistic Greek word for philosophy, *philosophia*, translates into 'love of wisdom,'" I say.

"What is wisdom?" he asks.

"What do you take it to mean?" I reply.

"I think you can only answer this by answering what a wise person is," one says.

"So, what is a wise person?" I ask.

He does not reply for quite some time. Finally he says, "I think a wise person is someone who has the rare ability to apply effectively what he's learned about life and about people. He's not easily misled and he doesn't mislead."

Another says, "A wise person knows how to apply his knowledge through experience. And he's someone who shares with others what he knows."

An inmate with a dour expression says, "A wise person is someone who knows what type of knowledge he should share, and what type he shouldn't share. For instance, a man who knows how to defraud an ATM machine wouldn't pass that know-how to someone else if he were wise, because that is a 'bad' kind of knowledge."

Seated on a bench to the left of me, an inmate who so far has been nodding in agreement to everything everyone has said now says, "I'd never thought about it that way before. I'd always thought that a wise person shares everything he knows. But now I think that it isn't wise to share all knowledge."

Then he says, "Do you think there's such a thing as 'bad' wisdom, as opposed to 'good wisdom'?"

Wolf interjects, "There's only good wisdom. 'Bad wisdom' is a contradiction in terms."

A professorial-looking man says in a rather haughty way, "I agree that wisdom can only be good. In Plato's *Laws*, wisdom is considered one of the four virtues, along with temperance, courage, and justice. But in his *Republic*, it's considered the ruling virtue that subsumes the others. Aristotle, on the other hand,

made the distinction in his *Politics* between philosophical wisdom and practical wisdom. He wrote that practical wisdom is concerned with 'things human and things about which it is possible to deliberate.' But he said pre-Socratic philosophers like Thales and Anaxagoras only had philosophical wisdom, because they were 'ignorant of what is to their own advantage' and only 'know things that are remarkable, admirable, difficult and divine ... but useless.'" The fiftyish-looking man with a salt-and-pepper beard and thick glasses then says, without prompting, that he is serving a fifteen-year sentence for embezzling over one hundred thousand dollars from the private college where he used to be an administrator. Many moons earlier, he tells us, he'd earned bachelor's and master's degrees in philosophy from an Ivy League university.

No one else responds. Eventually I say, "Speaking of Aristotle, he was one of the first philosophers to make the observation that 'man is born possessing weapons for the use of wisdom and excellence, which it is possible to employ entirely for the opposite ends.'"

I go on, "Can't wise people do unwise things? Can't we be wise in some areas but absolutely idiotic in others?"

"I think I'm living proof of that," the erstwhile college administrator responds.

"Wisdom is something you strive for but never attain," John then says. But then he quickly adds, "No, that's not quite it. I mean, I think you can attain wisdom, but you can never attain absolute wisdom. The wisest people know they can never become but so wise. But even so they keep striving to becoming wiser every day. They strive to strike a better balance between common sense and knowledge and understanding. And they freely share what they've learned—when they think it's beneficial—with others."

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"I don't think that knowledge is or even should be shared freely, even if it's beneficial," says the person sitting beside him. "Sometimes you have to pay to learn, you have to earn learning. You have to take classes, you have to buy books and tapes, to gain knowledge, to become wise."

"Socrates never charged anyone to 'learn' from him," Wolf points out. "He preferred to remain poor than to capitalize on his method of wisdom."

"But that doesn't contradict my point," the man insists. "Learning is hard work, it seems to me. You do have to 'pay' for it, 'earn' it—maybe not with money, but with the effort you spend and exert on learning just about anything."

"What do you think is the best way, or some of the best kinds of ways, to learn?" I ask.

"Someone said King Solomon was wise because he spoke in parables," John says. "He wrote so you could learn from the story if you chose to, but he didn't try to cram lessons down your throat. That's 'the wisdom of Solomon.' That's why I like parables, because they respect the intelligence of the reader. They make you feel like you learned something on your own, and they teach us that there's rarely any sort of 'once and for all' type of answer to any significant question."

"I think that's why Søren Kierkegaard used parables—because the meaning you grasped from them was your own, a 'truth' you grasped as meaningful for yourself," says the former college administrator.

"How do you think people become wise?" I ask eventually.

"I know a few people who seem wise beyond their years," a wiry but athletically built man says, "but in general I think a person becomes wise by learning from years of accumulated experiences."

"I think all people are wise," another says.

I ask him, "Do all people learn from their experiences?"

"No," he says.

"Do you think wise people usually learn from their experiences?"

"Yes."

"Then how can all people be wise?"

"I think all people are born wise," he says. "But if we choose not to learn from our experiences, we become less and less wise. I knew better than to use drugs. I knew better than to steal things so I'd have money to buy drugs. I'd been caught before and been in prison before. But I did it again anyway. So I've become less wise as I've gotten older."

"I agree with him," says another. "It's like, one person will touch a pan of hot water once and burn his finger and never do it again. But another will touch it again and again and never seem to learn his lesson."

"I've been in and out of drug treatment programs and prisons, and still I made the same mistakes over and over," says a youngish man with a ragged countenance, his hair dyed in black and yellow streaks. "But this time I really think I've learned my lesson. Because this time I'm ready to learn and I'm ready to be receptive to what others are trying to teach me. So this time it's sinking in, while in the past it came across to me as just a lot of technical words and bullshit that went in one ear and out the other."

A reed-thin man with dark bags under his large green eyes runs his hand through his close-cropped hair and says, "Now that I'm clean of drugs, the fact that I've done drugs in my life gives me an edge over others. Because I know what it's like to have done drugs, I have an experience that many don't have. So this makes me wiser. I hope I never repeat this experience, but it's good that I've had it. It's good to experience 'bad things,' just to have that experience once."

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"I disagree with all my heart," says the man who'd just spoken of his revolving-door entry and exit from one drug treatment program and prison after another. "I don't think it was a good experience being a drug addict. I wish to God I'd never tried drugs even once. I wished I'd listened to those who tried to warn me off even trying them. I think if we all thought this philosophy of 'experiencing bad things once' was a good idea, just about everyone in society would be in jail or dead."

"I hear you, man," says the inmate who'd prompted this comment. "But I do think that because I have experienced being a drug addict, and have been able to overcome it, I'll be able to be a much more effective drug abuse counselor once I'm out of prison than I'd've been if I'd never been an addict."

"But what if you hadn't been able to break the addiction?" the other inmate says. "What if you'd ended up dying of an overdose? It's not always possible to overcome these bad things. And what if the bad thing you tried, even just once, didn't just harm you, but others? What if the bad thing you tried was murder?"

The reed-thin inmate smiles at his interrogator. "You've got me there."

Again, there is a comfortable silence as we think over all that's been said so far.

"Who are some of the people you think of as wise?" I eventually ask. "Maybe that'll help us find out what the criteria of wisdom are."

"Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., were wise," says a man with a crescent-shaped scar on one cheek, which if anything heightens his dashing looks. "They practiced and preached nonviolence while trying to bring about social change, and they practiced what they preached. They sacrificed their lives to be an example to others that sometimes you have to be willing to die to set the rest of the world free."

A Mexican man says Pancho Villa was wise. "Even though he was outgunned and outmanned, Villa still managed to defeat the gringo army."

"Does that mean he was wise, or does it just mean he was able to outsmart his opponent?" someone asks him.

"Well, I think being smart enough to defeat a much more powerful opponent who wants to destroy your people requires what I'd call a very shrewd wisdom," he replies.

"Sigmund Freud was wise," a pensive inmate then says. "I learned more from his books than from anyone else about the roots of my own problems. Take his *Interpretation of Dreams*, where he's discussing Hamlet's behavior. He says that all explanations of why we are the way we are are 'capable of interpretation and actually demand nothing less for full understanding.' This is an incredible insight. Freud means that there's not just one irreducible explanation that points to why we are the way we are. Instead, there's numerous explanations, many of which may conflict with one another, but all of which shed light on our selves. It doesn't mean that every explanation is legitimate or revealing, but it does mean that we have to try to understand ourselves from all kinds of standpoints."

Then an inmate who looks to be around nineteen says softly, "My grandfather was wise. If I'd only listened to him, I wouldn't be in jail today."

"I don't think we should only speak about wise people," another says. "We should also speak of wise places. The Grand Canyon is a wise place. Whenever I've been there, in the middle of all that solitude, I've been able to think wise thoughts. Those thoughts come from that wise place."

"What do you mean by 'wise thoughts'?" someone asks him.

"I mean, thoughts that put me at peace," he replies. "Thoughts that make me realize I'm a foibled and flawed person, but that I

can always strive to do better, to be better, and that it's my duty to do and be better. Thoughts that make me realize it's okay to follow my own drummer. If I could have taken these thoughts with me away from the Grand Canyon and applied them when I was back in the inner city, I wouldn't be here right now."

"I think Mother Earth herself is a wise place," another says. "She's survived for billions of years, even though we've tried our best to destroy her. She'll still be here long after we're gone."

"But in order for something to be wise, doesn't it have to be conscious?" someone asks him.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I think this earth is conscious," he replies. He's not the only one: in 1979 Dr. James Lovelock, a British chemist, first set forth his Gaia Hypothesis, in which he asserted that the earth should be seen holistically as a "self-regulating living system." According to Lovelock, "The entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses and from oaks to algae, could be regarded as constituting a single living entity... endowed with faculties and powers far beyond those of its constituent parts." If this is so, it would follow that since humans are conscious, and since humans are no more or less than constituent parts of the earth as a whole, then the earth itself is conscious.

"Let's go back to talking about wisdom as it relates to people," I say to the group. "Do you think a wise person would ever say he or she is wise?"

A clean-cut, preppie-looking man sitting on the bench closest to the entrance says, "Didn't Socrates say something like 'The wisest people know they're not very wise'?" He has had his head down for the entire conversation, until now. I had long since assumed that he was fast asleep.

"Can you expand on that?" I ask.

"Plato wrote in his *Apology* that it was Socrates' mission to search out people who his city brothers thought were the wisest of all. He wanted to find out if these people really lived up to their billing. Each time, he came to the same conclusion: They weren't wise. In fact they were fucking idiots." A lot of us laugh. But his expression remains serious.

Then he says, "Hold on a sec." He pulls out an old slender paperback edition of Plato's *Apology* that had been stuffed in his back pocket. As he thumbs through the pages before landing on the one he's looking for, he says, "In the *Apology*, Socrates tells how he cross-examined one guy who was considered by the Athenian bigwigs to be the wisest of the wise and who agreed with their assessment."

He finds the page he's looking for. He clears his throat. "Socrates says here, 'I decided that although the man seemed to many people, and above all to himself, to be wise, in reality he was not wise. I tried to demonstrate to him that he thought he was wise, but actually was not, and as a result I made an enemy of him, and of many of those present [here at the trial]. To myself, as I left him, I reflected: 'Here is one man less wise than me. In all probability neither of us knows anything worth knowing; but he thinks he knows when he doesn't, whereas I, given that I don't in fact know, am at least aware I don't know. Apparently, therefore, I am wiser than him in just this one small detail, that when I don't know something, I don't think I know it either.' From him I went to another man, one of those who seemed wiser than the first. I came to exactly the same conclusion, and made an enemy of him and of many others besides.'"

He raises his head and looks at us. "Socrates showed that the knowledge of these so-called wise men was just a house of cards."

"But unlike those people Socrates came up against, I think the

people we've been talking about today are very wise," John says. "If anyone ever asked them if they were wise and they said they weren't, they'd be lying."

"I think what Socrates is saying is that wise people have more humility about their wisdom than most people," replies the man who just read from Plato's *Apology*. I later found out that this man is serving a long sentence for committing grand larceny; this is the fourth time he's been caught and convicted of a felony offense.

"Socrates believed that wise people know that what they know may not be the truth for all time," he goes on to say. "But his judges and persecutors felt that this belief was blasphemy. And you know what? It was. It was good blasphemy. But they didn't want to deal with that, so they decided to kill him."

Thumbing through the pages of his book distractedly, he then says, "And you know what else? If they hadn't passed that evil and idiotic death sentence on Socrates, I bet his wisdom and moral courage wouldn't have stood out so clearly. I bet it wouldn't have stood the test of time and been an inspiration ever since."

To be sure, I was in a prison. I could feel the dull and oppressive sense of confinement all around. But I could also feel that its inhabitants exuded an unusual and even exuberant wisdom. These men engaged in our dialogue with probing and incisive honesty. And while I know that what I am thinking just now may not be a truth for all time, it does occur to me that in many ways they are free. Certainly more free than many with whom I philosophize in the so-called outside world and who seem to live in rigid intellectual prisons of their own making. Even a prison can also be a wise place, a place where one's thinking can reach beyond ordinary boundaries.

Emerson wrote, "Every thought is also a prison. . . . Therefore we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains and admits us to a new scene."

These inmates admitted me to a new scene. I'm no doubt freer as a result.