

Philosophical Practice and Aporia in Prison

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Abstract: In this paper we discuss how through our bi-weekly Socratic dialogue groups with inmates at the Metropolitan Correctional Center downtown San Diego, we were able to bring the inmates to a sense of aporia or puzzlement. Not only did the dialogues help to uncover assumptions, uncovering the dots, so to speak, but also to help reconnect the dots and see their world from a different perspective. It allowed them to question their lives in a safe and non-judgmental environment. They felt empowered by these dialogues to become their own life's judges, freeing themselves from feeling oppressed by the judgments of others.

Key words: aporia, puzzlement, Socratic dialogue, working with inmates, becoming one's own judge in life, fidelity, humor, philosophy with children

“The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.” - Albert Einstein -

1. Aporia

When rationality fails us we are puzzled and left with a sense of aporia (*ἀπορία*) meaning puzzlement or wonderment. We are “at a loss,” perplexed. Many of Plato's dialogues leave us with this sense of aporia. What we thought we knew, we have to admit we do not

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know - rationally. On the other hand, we may have developed a deeper sense of what love or courage means in the process.

In our philosophical discussions with the inmates, we used questions not just to uncover hidden assumptions which get in the way of thinking things through with clarity, but to lead them to a place of *aporia* - puzzlement, a place of “not-knowing.” Philosophy is the pursuit of truth through clear thinking (the rational mind); it is also the pursuit of wisdom, a deeper truth (the intuitive mind, which Einstein called a sacred gift). Philosophy is about learning about the world, developing an understanding of the world, and being able to navigate the world.

2. Limits of rational thought

Eastern philosophy tries to give us a deeper sense of understanding reality through showing the limits of rational thought as well. The Zen koan of the sound of one hand clapping is to guide students to enlightenment. Where the mind hits a wall, a deeper understanding can emerge.

Oftentimes we try to replace deeper thinking with knowledge. The more I know, the less I have to think. I have the answers, so I do not have to live in a world of uncertainty, ambiguity, feeling perplexed or “at a loss.” However, this is precisely the place true thinking can begin: now what? When we are “at a loss,” we tend to seek advice from an “expert.” Our own thinking seems to have failed us. But in philosophical practice *aporia* empowers us to rethink what we thought we knew.

2.1 Iceberg

It is as though our ability to explain the world we live in resembles the tip of the iceberg above the surface. Similarly, what we understand but do not have words for exists below the surface.

What is below is certainly as real as what exists above the surface, but we cannot explain it the same way. To explain what exists below the surface we use metaphors, analogies, poetry, music or scientific explanations such as space-time or the Higgs boson or philosophy. Nevertheless, we know love reading Solomon's Love in the Song of Songs (New American Standard Bible); we know courage when we read about Hector's bravery in Homer's Iliad.

2.2 The compass

This deeper understanding helps us to set up a kind of internal compass, guided by which we can learn to recognize the value of something (not all that glitters is gold), the potential danger of something (recognizing red flags in life), and to navigate the world. This compass guides us in our decision-making to survive a complex and dangerous world. The compass needs to be educated much in the way Socrates tried to educate his interlocutors in the Agora, or Zen Buddhists try to educate their students.

2.3 Educating our compass

The compass we use to navigate life needs to be cultivated from an early age. It does not tell us rationally what is good or what is bad. It is not that simple. Remember, the stars we sail by, are not fixed, either. So we need to develop a sense for what may be right or not in any particular situation. We may have a general sense, but need to learn how to apply this general sense to specific situations, which are unique. In every new situation we have to figure out what is the right thing to do (not the correct thing, for that seems to imply there is only one correct way).

2.4 Navigating our ship

To navigate our ship in this world, we need concrete skills, of

course. What use is it knowing how to sail by the stars when we do not know how to handle a ship on the high seas. But with all the technical skills of sailing lacking the knowledge of how to orient our ship, we are lost at sea. My sense is that we put too much weight on acquiring concrete knowledge and too little--now-a-days anyway--on our ability to sail by the stars.

Yet, with our compass intact, we might be better able to recognize the red flags when we see them in real life and not find ways to rationalize, justify or ignore the reality right before our eyes. When we recognize them early, they can be handled so much easier and better. Molehills are less difficult than mountains. And to get rid of a mountain, you may just have to blow it up, using violence.

2.5 Missing the red flags

Why was Michigan State not able to respond to the pleas and red flags long before Dr. Larry Nassar finally got arrested for sexually abusing the gymnasts in his charge? What were they thinking? Did they fear the reputation of the University was at stake and “preferred” to ignore the signs instead, hoping these were “isolated” incidents that would “go away”?

How often do we “miss” the signs and wonder “how come” we didn’t “see” the red flags earlier, whether we are talking about mass shootings at schools, abuse, bullying leading to a student’s suicide, and so on.

How often did the inmates “miss” or “choose” to “ignore” the red flags in their lives? This is what many started to question about themselves, “what was I thinking.”

3. Philosophical counseling to fine-tuning compass

In our philosophical discussions, we try to focus on our internal compass. The compass has the cardinal directions, but it also has all the degrees in between. And every degree can make a huge

difference in how to steer your ship.

For example: Whereas fear may be a good thing in some instances, it may not be in others. Lying may be necessary in some instances and a good thing, and in other cases it may be harmful and hurtful. So how do you decide? This is where navigational skills come into play. What may work in some instances may in fact be the entirely wrong thing to do in other cases. So how can you tell? This is where you need to learn how to respond to complex situations, and not reduce all situations to a one fits all solution.

When I told my professor in the *Plato Seminar* (in 1979) that I would like to re-write some of Plato's dialogues for children, he suggested I write my final paper on a topic in philosophy that could be understood by children. That's how Stella (12 years old at the time), my landlady's niece and I ended up writing in dialogue format, *How Come the Opposite of What I think is True is Usually Really True?*

The paper focuses on how fear often interferes with our thinking. We often do things we might not do otherwise, if it weren't for the fact that fear had us thinking differently, often leaving us with a feeling of regret: what was I thinking?

We need to understand fear intuitively, using real-world cases, rather than rationally - for fear cannot be explained rationally. How do I know when my thinking is motivated by fear rather than fairness, for example? It's rational to justify retaliation, hitting back against others as being "fair." But is it?

If we cannot self-regulate our thinking using our own compass, we depend on others. This dependency robs us of our ability to enter into interdependent relationships with each other, with our compass and inborn relationship with the world and ourselves intact.

What expertise do philosophers have and what can they bring to a philosophical discussion with their clients? Philosophers are experts in not knowing, experts in aporia. In practicing the art of philosophy, we engage each other to think together to explore concepts we only vaguely understand. Thinking together not only binds us, but also allows us to explore unknown and perhaps

unknowable territory with joy, curiosity and confidence.

4. Socratic dialogue with inmates at the Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC)

The intellectual atmosphere in the *MCC*, and most other prisons, is generally quite limited. The quality of books available in their libraries leaves much to be desired in terms of intellectual stimulation. There is an overbearing atmosphere in the jail, one that corrodes, deadens and destroys inmates' ability to think clearly, critically and responsibly. What happens in prisons and jails is a return of communities where base instincts surface and rule through race, color, sex and power (think of Lawrence Kohlberg's Stage 2 level of moral development). Prison is not a place where trust easily develops, nor is it a place where inquiry of ideas is possible without fear or threat. In fact, prison is a place where you learn to play along in whatever way officials expect you to and to keep both your feelings and thoughts to yourself. Prison is often the breeding ground for deflection of responsibilities, becoming a victim of the system and fertile ground for disavowing one's responsibility for one's own life. In a relatively short time inmates learn the psychological language that will get them medications for depression and/or anxiety while earning for themselves a diagnosis that will follow them for the rest of their lives.

During the fall of 2002, we discussed the possibility of developing a Socratic Dialogue group in the jail. We both started a successful Socratic Cafe at Barnes and Noble Bookstore and we thought we might try a similar club with the inmates. We believed we could develop a genuine community of inquiry if we could create an alternative for inmates who were not challenged or who might otherwise choose to define themselves by mental or physical illness. We hoped to offer instead the joy of thinking freely and critically.

Willy introduced Maria by her title and by the type of teaching she did at UCSD but never told them she was his wife. We wanted

them to feel free to respond toward Maria, not be hindered by the fact that she was the Prison Chaplain's wife. We gave a short overview of the type of philosophy we would be discussing and outlined some of the writers and themes we would be using to jumpstart our discussions. Our objective was to understand philosophy as a way of life. We started the group off with the existentialists and later studied the Ancient Greeks. The Ancient Greeks provided an understanding of life along with the spiritual exercises and practices to achieve a reasoned choice of life, with an emphasis on achieving freedom from suffering (Epicureans), or exercising moral intent (Stoics), or living the good life (Platonists), etc.

We gave inmates the readings we would discuss two weeks in advance. Again, this was so the texts would stimulate their own thinking on the matter. Over the course of 4 years we used readings from *Finite and Infinite Games*, by J. P. Carse, *Man's Search for Meaning*, by V. Frankl, *Meaning Crisis*, by S. Segal, *The Education of Character*, by Martin Buber. We also read excerpts from P. Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, and completely read his book, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Another book, which we read in its entirety, was *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*, by A. C. Sponville. (We transcribed three of our discussions on Sponville's chapters. In this presentation we will discuss in depth our discussion and findings on the topic of fidelity). Additionally we read articles from *The American Psychologist* and *The Psychotherapy Networker*. We included a philosophy for children component, since a number of the inmates in the group had children. We read children's stories and talked about how the inmates could use these topics to discuss life's issues with their children. Some examples of the children books we read were, *Milo and the Magical Stones*, by M. Pfister, *Doctor De Soto*, by W. Steig, and *Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse*, by L. Leoni.

In the beginning of every session we described the rules we would follow in our discussions. Simply put: wait until the other finishes before speaking; do not seek to argue but seek to understand; questions posed to each other should be open and

inquiring questions or ask questions for clarification. We were looking for the bigger picture and each person's perspective would be accepted as part of building that bigger picture. No one was to dominate the discussion and if there was a period of silence, we were to simply allow it to take us where it did. At the end of our discussions as we would wind down and allow for last words and ideas from everyone which was followed by a period of silence and a selection of music played for everyone to experience. We chose classical music, jazz, blues, music from different cultures, etc. At the end of the session the inmates were invited to spread out anywhere in the chapel and take whatever position they felt comfortable taking while they listened to the music. We believe philosophy does not have the monopoly on reflection and we wanted to give the inmates an experience they could reflect on without words. After the music finished we slowly moved out of the chapel and into the elevators that would take the inmates back to their housing units.

An interesting side of this group began to show itself when Willy invited inmates into the group who were not in the white-collar category. These were inmates who were not as articulate, nor as well read or culturally sophisticated as the others and had some definite deficits. For some English was their second language. We thought that by bringing inmates not on par with the others into the group two things could happen: (a) the new inmate would leave immediately because he felt he could not keep up; and the group would not allow anyone outside their group to participate without hostility, (b) the new inmate would become challenged by the group and would put out a great deal of effort to stay up with the group; and in turn, the group would be so engrossed with learning that it would encourage the new inmate to learn and indeed would make every effort to assist the new inmate in the process. What actually transpired between the group and the new inmate was a lot more involved. The group not only welcomed new inmates but challenged them to be honest, work hard and feel part of this new community of inquiring minds, that took great pride and joy in who they were becoming.

Slowly we began to create a community of inquiry, a community of mutual trust, which allowed us to respond from our direct life experiences. We were becoming in M. Buber's words a *community of healing*. In this group we had created the 'free space' in which matters of the heart could be expressed and where the big picture could be created. This big picture was being painted with real colors from real experiences and was creating for us a panorama of an aspect of the human condition which could in turn help each one of us get a better perspective on how to evaluate and analyze our own piece of it. As we know the bigger picture enhances our understanding and increases our understanding as it serves as a point from which we can critically look, analyze and question our own experiences. To be able to do this well involves personal integrity. Knowledge can easily be used to manipulate and skew the reality of one's experience. But understanding reaches deeper into the psyche and any attempt at deception or self-deception becomes harder to do. Honesty becomes essential in trying to find our way out of a quagmire of beliefs, lies and preconceptions about reality. Someone who is not merely interested in defending his existence in life, but interested in actually honestly questioning one's existence needs to rely on the ability to reflect on one's life with openness, curiosity and a willingness to see what will emerge out of the hidden depth of one's existence. We try to awaken a sense of intense interest in looking at what life is about and our own role in it. *Who ARE we? What DO we want?*

These are the questions every philosopher is intrigued by, whether they live behind prison bars, mental bars, or any other kind of bar which limits our vision of the universe we live in. For this reason this can be a very liberating experience - for anybody, no matter on which side of the prison wall they spend their lives - whether they live 'in here' or 'out there.' Philosophy has a way of breaking down the prison walls and looks at a world much larger and much more complex and confusing than the small worlds we have created for ourselves.

Philosophy helps to open (prison) doors and to show us how we can become flexible thinkers, thinkers who can adapt their minds to

different ways of viewing the world and wrap their increasingly agile minds around increasingly complex forms of thought. Philosophy helps us to become dancers of the universe instead of fixated on one way of being. The world is not black or white, neither is it gray. It is colorful and multidimensional and bewildering and engaging. Philosophy helps to get people engaged in their world and in their way of being in the world and in their ability to make decisions about how to live their lives and feel it is they who are in charge, not God, not their boss, not their spouse or their life's circumstances - but they. Philosophy teaches that what you think and do actually matters and has direct consequences for how that is going to impact the rest of your life. Philosophy is a transforming experience - life will never be the same anymore, for what you assumed all your life and took for granted has now been put into question and into perspective. Life becomes a kaleidoscope of colors impossible to ignore. There is a saying, the priest will tell you, you are sinful, the psychologist will tell you, you are sick, and the philosopher will tell you, you are stupid, you choose!

Overwhelmingly, the inmates were becoming more interested in this type of philosophical discourse. They expressed how they felt empowered to become their own judges, and not be constantly judged by others. They didn't have to create reasons or excuses to be able to live with themselves and others, but could openly question how they had lived a life that brought them to jail. They began to question their thinking and why they acted in the ways they had. How could they change? What could they do to create that change? The Socratic dialogues created a sense of aporia and puzzlement and encouraged inmates to re-think what they always took for granted and never really questioned. Socratic dialogue invites them to think freely and for themselves.

As a result of our Socratic group we created new ways of thinking that were appealing and meaningful to the inmates. No one needed to preach to them or tell them how they should change and better their ways. They began to feel empowered to do what they reasoned as right necessary to get a grip on their lives. We believe our Socratic group helped these inmates discover and exercise free

will.

We tried to convey in our group discussions that philosophy is alive. We want it to become an experience, so it can be integrated into the totality of their experience. Abstract thought remains just that – abstract, and cannot move one, quite literally, to a different way of seeing and being in the world. Einstein did not simply mull over some abstract thoughts; in his greatly imaginative mind he saw himself riding on a beam of light in order to figure out what happened. Likewise, we are appealing to the inmates' imagination, so they can experience their thoughts and not just have them. Different thoughts should actually make one feel different. Thoughts should appeal to one's imagination the way paintings do, the way music does, the way we are so engrossed in a theatre piece or opera that we think we are actually on stage with them. Philosophy should be tangible. One should be able to see, feel, taste and smell thoughts. Only then can it be a transforming experience, the way the ancient Greeks imagined it to have. The Stoics, Cynics, the Platonists all believed that philosophy could enhance the good life and surely not just by thinking about it. That's why they came up with spiritual exercises and forms of meditations. It had to become part of one's flesh and bones. One had to become a different person overall. Abstract thought divorced from everyday living is not what we wanted them to think philosophy was limited to.

Now we'll look more closely at one of our discussions. This particular one was on the topic of 'fidelity.' The inmates had read the chapter on fidelity in A. C. Sponville's book, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*. The purpose of reading the articles in advance was to get the inmates thinking on the topic and generate their own ideas, which they would bring to the group. The discussions were not so much about the chapter as they were about the particular topics the chapter raised.

Let me give a brief summary of some of the main points in his chapter to provide a context for the dialogue we had. Sponville starts by bringing up notions such as fidelity as being the ability to resist forgetfulness, how reason is fidelity to truth, and how forgetful thought is unmindful thought. He states that we are human

through memory, mindfulness and fidelity. He contrasts fidelity, which refuses to be annihilated to infidelity, which is frivolous, self-serving, and fickle, that which disavows, betrays and is inconsistent. Sponville outlines three modes of fidelity, namely fidelity of thought, fidelity of morality and fidelity of the couple. Fidelity of thought entails an effort to preserve thought and struggle against forgetfulness; it entails the will to remember. He points out, though, that we must be faithful to truth first and not one's thoughts. To be faithful only to one's thoughts would lead to fanaticism and dogmatism. He adds that philosophy is extreme faithfulness to thought. Morality says Sponville is fidelity to the humanity of man and is the source of all morality. It is steeped in human law and is derived, like all cultures, from the past. Fidelity of the couple looks at how fidelity does not mean exclusiveness. Truth, he says, is a higher value than morality. He continues by saying that fidelity is the grateful memory of the love received and given. It does not mean I will love you forever, but forever will be faithful to the love we know now.

Now to the actual discussion: Willy "... so we thought we could start by asking what the definition of fidelity might be. I mean, after reading the article, does anyone have a sense of what fidelity means, and what would it mean to you?" One inmate starts by saying: "I guess fidelity is something you believe in. I never used fidelity too much, so I haven't looked at it much..."

Another chimes in: "I didn't read the article, but, um, the first thing that comes to mind would be my wife, as far as fidelity is concerned, be faithful..."

Someone else states: "... I can imagine the institution of marriage ... and that fidelity, that um, commitment, that loyalty is kind of like glue, if you will, that holds things together."

Then yet another says: "... of the eight or ten different things that I underlined, I liked the one, uh, of not betraying the best. And that's for your wife, for ideals, for friends or whatever it is that you are working with..."

Someone else chimes in: "Right! Including your honor or anything else. I mean, once, once you're on board, do not board. It

goes back to old sayings like that kind of a thing.”

In the following, we track the development of the discussion. The following comments are pulled from the verbatim transcript of the discussion. We taped around twelve discussions, for which we received permission from the group. On one occasion, one inmate did not want our session recorded, and so we refrained from doing so that time.

In our discussions we stress the importance of making a link between our ideas and concrete examples. Fidelity means: To be faithful to one's wife → loyalty to values → concretely, it is a commitment to, say the institution of marriage and specifically to one person → concretely, commitment is like the glue that holds things together. This implies not betraying something → concretely, not betraying something you hold dear like your values, your friends, honor, your ideals, etc. → there's a link between honor and faithfulness and creativity → being faithful not just when things are going your way, but especially when in the face of being threatened → concretely, not to betray when under extreme pressure and threat → you are loyal to the vows, and the memory of the vows → concretely, a commitment to the remembrance of the vows → betrayal then implies betrayal of this specific memory.

→ Memory of epiphanies, something that is truly real → concretely, a concrete experience that I know and want that to be the burning flame in my life → to keep that alive → concretely, to keep that specific reality, that experience, that truth or that relationship alive → fidelity is keeping the flame burning alive → it is an attitude towards life → one that grounds all the other virtues → fidelity as a way of life → the burning flame as a way of life → following the flame → not holding to preconceived ideas → faithful to underlying principles → concretely, say, to the principles of education such as exploration, discipline, self-control, etc.

→ Staying faithful while holding the tension between self-doubt and staying true to your principles → a difficult place to make a decision → concretely, honoring the commitment to another person in an environment that is alienating, hostile and denigrating →

rising above the threat of the environment → in fidelity lies the truth of personal identity, for example, as educator, as chaplain, or as vegetarian, through the food you eat → for instance, I'd rather starve than eat meat → fidelity to personal identity → relates to everything you decide to stay faithful to.

→ Here we return to the idea of fidelity being faithful to a wife, a woman, etc. → your personal identity is intertwined with what you are faithful to → when you have nothing to live for, you live moment to moment → concretely, considered an alien by others undermines your identity → when relationships, environment, circumstances are stronger than self, identity is undermined, → for example, when you feel alienated in your 'new' country (USA) and in your 'old' country (Mexico) → I feel faithful to my 'old' country (Mexico), but cannot stay there anymore → it's like a little girl from the country going to the city → fidelity to the person standing in front of the judge → tension between fidelity to the person you are and fidelity to the justice system → having fidelity to oneself and one's integrity → it becomes a challenge to remain faithful to our justice system → conflict between fidelity to self and fidelity to system, for example to the system of marriage, the system of education, of chaplaincy, of cultural eating habits, of being considered a alien in another country, to the system of justice (injustice).

Summary

Conflict or tension between self and a 'system' → challenges the self not to betray the memory of what one holds dear → not to betray ones identity → fidelity to the burning flame in the face of being threatened → creates a struggle to maintain or survive or create a 'new' self or identity, without compromising your life, the values you hold dear, your honor, your ideals, etc. → if - in fidelity lies the truth of personal identity, we have to examine what we are being faithful to → an unexamined life is not worth living!

As you can see from the above outline, we always want to make sure that we make a link between our ideas and concrete examples

(note all the times I write ‘concretely’ followed by a concrete example of that idea). For example, when someone talked about the memory of epiphanies, they meant the memory of a specific experience they wanted to burn into memory, so to speak. We stress the importance of listening to each other’s ideas and examples for they all form part of the puzzle of the bigger picture we are trying to create. Our discussions are not so much focused on whether we agree or disagree, as it is to gain a fuller grasp of the concept we are struggling to understand. We all have ideas about what fidelity means, but we know it better when we “see” it rather than through some definition. It is often the definitions which people gave that spurred Socrates on to show them that they really had no knowledge of what they were talking about. But you could somehow always tell if someone behaved bravely or cowardly. It was never doubted that Socrates and the two generals Laches and Nicias in “Laches” were courageous men. They couldn’t seem to accurately describe and define the idea of courage, though.

In our discussions we emphasized the importance of building on one another’s ideas. When we spoke, we wanted to be sure the words were living words based on concrete life experiences and not words shrouded in abstraction and vagueness or “borrowed” from someone else. We also wanted to keep the discussion open without any forethought as to where it might be going, or directing it towards a specific goal. It had to remain a surprise with every new example being another stepping stone in a river of ideas no one had traversed before. No one river is ever the same, because it always depends on who is in the group. As we were on the river, we were literally tacking in the wind in order to discover the nature of the river we were traveling. We never knew where we were going, yet we depended upon each other for getting there. It kept us all in suspense, which is the exciting part about doing philosophy right.

One of the more memorable moments had to do with the discussion we had on the topic of humor. Again, we started with Sponville’s chapter on humor. Briefly, Sponville points to the difference between humor and irony, where humor is self-effacing and heals wounds and is humble, irony (though sarcasm seems a

better translation from the French) is known to wound and functions to humiliate and denigrate. Irony knows no sympathy. He concludes by saying that good faith leads to humor, bad faith to irony. He also points to the link between truth and humor.

In the course of this dialogue we hit on the difference between the prosecutor and the defense, where the defense always showed humor where the prosecutor showed irony.

One inmate says: “I think what, what connects humor and truth together is the fact that for there to be any humor there has to be universal, universality of the, you know, let’s say the joke. Universality gets to something truthful. It wouldn’t have this affect, and it wouldn’t be effective if it didn’t share a truth of all the people that were listening.”

Someone else says: “What that does is, it basically pierces through, the self, or ego, or, uh, the putting on airs that people have…” He continues after a pause: “Deceptions, or just the, the affectations that some people have, uh, and it pierces through all that; it gets to the core of all that we share in common. And that’s where we get the humor and truth combination. If it doesn’t, humor doesn’t work without an element of truth.”

Willy chimes in: “Of course, humor includes humility. And humility is an aspect, which is open to truth, or at least there is a frame of being, a frame of reference that one has in relation to life and truth that makes truth so much more available to you. A humble person is a person who is willing to hear, to listen, to experience, to see. The arrogant person is not. The arrogant person already knows everything, is shut, and is so full of themselves. So, uh, humor has a quality of humility as well, which, which is a connecting aspect to truth.”

A bit further into the discussion, one inmate says that he doesn’t really trust anyone who doesn’t smile. Then he continues by bringing up prosecutors, when everybody starts laughing. He says: “When you actually use the, a close at hand example, not much smiling goes on there. In fact, they’re actually, to a certain extent, insulted with the fact that the defendant in the case, is, approaches the situation with more humor or irony, or a combination of the

two than they do. Uh, not that they're not trying to be serious..."

Then Maria asks: "So why would they have more humor on the defense, more truth?" One inmate states; "The point of truth, exactly! I'd hate to say it like that, but that's the exact truth." At this point someone calls out for a group "A-men!" A resounding A-men is heard, followed by lots of laughter and people all talking at once.

One inmate continues: "They know what the truth of the matter is, and lots of times the prosecutor's version, and I'm not arguing, but the prosecutor's versions are not necessarily approaching the truth. They're approaching the story that they are overlaying onto a set of circumstances for the truth to convince others. They can't approach it, uh, in some humorous or ironic way, because it is a construction." Someone else continues: "There is a core of truth to it that they build on, and that's, that's where the lack of truth comes in. If they would ever operate from a truthful standpoint either on the delivery of information side, or the reception of information side, humor can take place."

Maria asks: "Wouldn't there be more truth in the justice system if both were able to see the situation from a more humorous standpoint?" As the dialogue continues, it seems that prosecutors may be afraid of what others have to say, "because they have to uphold their 98% accomplishment rating," one inmate concludes. A week or so later Willy shows the PBS video "The Plea" to members in his Men's Group, many of who also participate in the Socratic Dialogue Group. This video shows how clearly truth is compromised for the sake of maintaining the image that the justice system makes sure that justice is served at any expense, including truth.

During these group meetings we noticed an increasing willingness to come forward with personal examples and histories for the purpose of understanding one's experiences in light of a greater understanding of the issues involved. Everyone is increasingly becoming their own judges, as they examine their own experiences and thoughts more closely. They are also more willing to listen to the suggestions of others, without becoming instantly defensive.

Trust is starting to be the glue, which holds this group together. Becoming critical now serves to sharpen one's lenses to see ever more clearly into the human condition and life in general. It is no longer viewed as a personal affront. Many inmates go back to their cells with something to really think about and discuss with others on their floor.

They are more interested in how things make sense or don't, and are more focused on the world and their place in it as opposed to their own fate exclusively. They have more leverage and feel more empowered to actually becoming masters of their own destiny. To find fault with others and the world may be one way of looking at things, but being able to see the complexity of all things in this universe is far more intriguing, absurd, and ultimately humorous (perhaps). Questions become new ways of seeing and experiencing the world and oneself. Questions become pathways to lead them out of the quagmire of shifting grounds and dead ends. Philosophy has made them feel alive again and provides them with fresh air to breathe. The Socratic Dialogue group becomes something we all look forward to. Suddenly the world is full of rich possibilities again. Philosophy is not a panacea for all ills, but it does bring new hope and possibilities to those who thought the world was basically just one way, brutish and unfair.

Here are three examples of some of the topics that came up for discussion. When we were discussing Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, with a focus on finding meaning within the Nazi extermination camps during WW II, one of the inmates, who was Jewish, spoke out saying that finding meaning in the worst of circumstances was encouraging and he could see why we had decided to discuss this seminal work in our Socratic Dialogue group. But, he said, as important as the message in the book is, there was one element that made it almost irrelevant to the people in this particular group because of the fact that the Jews in the extermination camps were innocent and that he himself was guilty. The silence that followed that comment was palpable. It is also interesting to note that this inmate later became a Rabbi when he was released from prison. Another example had to do with the idea

that “a man is expected to protect his family.” One of the inmates brought up how he learned from his father that to kill to protect his family was not wrong. It was what was expected of him. After our discussions, he came to re-evaluate the idea of what it meant to “protect” something. Does it condone killing someone? This raised the question if it is alright to kill in self-defense and what is considered self-defense? When is it self-defense and when is it murder? A third example had to do with discussing the idea of greed. We brought up the funny notion of how best to catch a monkey in the wild. We had seen a clip on a nature program where a hunter in the Kalahari was looking for water.

Monkeys knew where there was water and so it behooved one to “follow the monkey” in order to get access to the water source. Monkeys love salt. But it makes them thirsty, which is why the hunter after he caught the monkey would tie him up and give him a nice chunk of salt to lick from, after which he would be dying from thirst and run to his water source with the hunter on his heels. That’s how the hunter discovered the water source in a cave. But how to catch the monkey in the first place? In a pile of rocks the hunter saw a hole in which he put something delicious the monkey would not be able to resist. And sure enough before long, the monkey would stick his paw in the hole to grab the delicious morsel left there by the hunter. When the hunter came to catch the monkey the monkey refused to let go of the morsel, which meant that he could not get his fist out of the hole. Had he let it go, he could have slipped his hand out of the hole and run off. Wonderful story and one of the inmates immediately started laughing and told his version of how the cops got him. Just as the monkey was unwilling to let go, this inmate related the story how he had just loaded his van with a couple of great computers when he saw a keyboard he could not resist. And while he was busy trying to fit that last piece into his van, he heard the police sirens and well, the rest was history. He was now sitting in jail. Another very self-reflective story, which had everybody laughing.

We believe that this kind of philosophical dialogue can change the outcome of incarceration in America. As we know, the US has

the largest population of citizens in jail or prison in the world. We read in newspapers almost daily how many of the inmates released from prison return within a short time. We believe men and women return to prison because while they were in prison they neither learned about themselves or about life outside. We believe that the corrosive environment of prison does not rehabilitate anyone and to expect that once they are released from prison they should be law abiding self-sufficient individuals is very unrealistic.

Through proper use of philosophical dialogue in prisons we believe we can impact the rate of recidivism, and lower the incidents of violence in prisons. If we are successful, the numbers of inmates can decrease, the incidents of crime in society can be lowered and the cost to companies and the cost to the private sector would be reduced dramatically. The TV program *60 Minutes* had a very interesting piece on a related topic, showing that inmates engaged in serious academic learning lowered the rate of recidivism (April 15, 2007).

Philosophical dialogue works on the positive side of the human potential model. It helps promote inquiry, self-reflection and critical thinking which ultimately liberate individuals to face the challenges of life with strength and confidence. It puts the reins of direction back into the individual's hands and opens the doors to many possibilities. Philosophical dialogue restores confidence in one's ability to change, learn and overcome. It restores wonder in life, an element without which life would be bland and boring. Philosophical dialogue taps the unique in every individual putting potential and limitless possibilities back into their hands. Philosophical dialogue promotes personal power and strength to witness the truth in every individual's life so they can contribute to the larger picture we all are trying to figure out. In an effort to get some sense of the impact of these groups on the inmates we devised a simple questionnaire that asked, how their experience in the group affected their spiritual life, their thinking, and personal life.

5. Synopsis

5.1 Responses to the question how it affected their spiritual life

Some responses to the question how it affected their spiritual life were:

- It helps me to better understand the frailties and fantasies of the human mind which becomes fixated on himself and his achievements and accomplishments.
- I have been able to find the spot in my life where my faith fits.
- I think it helped me more with my everyday life.
- Since my religion is as much a philosophy as anything, the two go hand in hand.

5.2 Reaching beyond oneself - gaining insight into the human condition

Some responses to the question how it affected their thinking were:

- It has helped me to understand that my philosophical concepts are different, and must be so from others, and helped me to accept the different thoughts and feelings of others that don't necessarily mirror mine.
- To think about what I am trying to say it has made me realize there is always more than one way to look at things.
- I now know that other people's views should be respected because everyone is brought up differently.
- It has been a showering of information and has made me look at myself, my surroundings even deeper.
- Humankind, us, me have a history of forgetting truth by living in falsehood.

- I think that the group has caused me to think more critically of the events and the world around me.

5.3 Increased openness leading to increased ability to understand, handle oneself better, etc. - gaining insight from different perspectives

Some responses to the question how it affected their personal lives were:

- For me it has made me notice the things that could make me happier and those around me, for my place would be different.
- The group has taught me to be completely and totally honest with myself. If I am able to be truthful with myself I am able to see myself as others see me.
- It has made me examine what is important to my family, my friends, and me and as such know myself better.
- I seem to understand different people's point of view, which helps me see my life differently, less insular.
- I feel secure in the group and it gets me motivated to deal with reality.
- it has helped to respect other's feelings.

5.4 Becoming aware of others and the world around you- to know yourself

Jails and prisons can easily begin Socratic groups that begin looking at how and why we think the way we do. They can raise questions about alternative ways of seeing and being in the world and create different solutions and responses to the issues in their lives. Inmates can learn how to talk with each other and overcome the barriers that are between them, barriers that more often serve the purposes of the authorities than the inmates. They can learn to move from victim to witness of their experiences and really learn

the lessons of life by integrating them into the wise persons they are becoming.

During the philosophy for children component, for example, Maria read, *Alexander and the Wind Up Mouse* by Lionni to get the inmates to raise questions about the story, questions that we all could benefit from and learn to understand the story better. The story is about a real mouse that is chased around the house because it is a nuisance. The child in the house receives as a gift a wind-up mouse that moves only whenever the child winds it up. The outcome of the story is that the wind-up mouse eventually becomes a real mouse. Some of the questions the inmates wrote up after listening to the story were:

- How come - when humans are inside buildings they treat certain animals and insects as something to be exterminated? As if only if we are outside we can be apart of nature but not inside. Inside we are above nature. When it's a replica, it is tolerated.
- Why is it that when we want certain things so bad, we can only see the imperfections of what we have or what we look like? How wonderful the world would be if everyone were as altruistic as Alexander.
- Why do we want everyone to love us, even sometimes at our detriment?
- Why do we want to be someone other than ourselves? Because we are not content with ourselves, because we don't know ourselves.
- Why do people appreciate the imitation form more than the real?
- Does transformation always come from an outside force/entity?
- Don't go to the magic lizard – change yourself!
- Loneliness affects the smallest of things
- Do we throw things out we say we love?

This little children's story brought out so much in these men, so much feeling, so many thoughts about life and how they had been

living.

Philosophical dialogue can help inmates put their experiences in proper order and with clear thinking help them solve issues, which have haunted them all of their lives. They can discuss social patterns, racism, economics, politics, virtue, health, meaning in life.

Philosophical dialogue can create communities of inquiry where inmates can learn to discuss, understand and overcome prejudices, hatreds, fears and lies that imprison them. In the process inmates will be healed through dialogue and can learn to trust in others and in themselves. For many inmates a community of inquiry will outweigh the need and desire to join gangs and will foster greater interest in family, community and nation.

Inmates who participate in philosophical dialogue want to start taking control of lives again, not through a handicap of medicines or through a diagnosis that releases them from their responsibility to life but through full, intimate connection where all of their creative energies can be put to better, more productive use. A life unexamined is truly not worth living. Through philosophical dialogue inmates are given their lives back and in this process all of society benefits through their energy, gifts and through a depth of understanding they have gained from a place few of us have ever been.

We would like to end with a quote from one of our favorite books, *Mister God; This is Anna*, by Fynn:

“And so it went on. Hour after hour, day after day, year after year. Like summer lightening the conversation flickered and flared, lighting up dark places, forging a philosophy, a theology, a way of life. It was this that Anna was so greedy for. It may not sound very much but it was the ore from which the gold came.”

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