

Caged Explorers: The Hunger For Control¹

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To achieve happiness and freedom you must desire
nothing else but what is entirely in your control—and
that is only your own thoughts and opinions.
—Epictetus, *The Manual*

The letter's return address had a name, the letters MHC, and a number next to it. I had no idea what it meant but it was obvious from the carefully lettered envelope and handwritten letter that great effort was spent preparing it. The letter was a strange and bold request. It would lead me to the gates of the Maryland House of Corrections, a high medium/maximum security facility, the flagship of seven prisons surrounding a place in the Maryland landscape called Jessup, only a few miles from Fort Meade, the home of the National Security Agency.

My contact with the Maryland House of Corrections began when I was asked for some Touchstones materials for an information fair at a prison. Twice a year the organizations that assist prisoners maintain some contact with their families, and the many self-help programs that are designed to encourage prisoners present their information in a large activity area. Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, violence prevention programs, parenting advice, various Christian and Muslim ministries, and even the Junior Chamber of Commerce send representatives with brochures. Touchstones is a program originally designed for pre-college students of all backgrounds to overcome their passivity and enable them to collaborate and explore. It uses short seminal texts to initiate discus-

¹This piece is dedicated to the memory of Brother Robert Smith, who wanted me to share these thoughts and experiences with our St. John's Community.

sions in which students transform their thinking and their behavior toward others and themselves. Since at that time my work with Touchstones was primarily in schools, I sent the first high school volume of texts along with the accompanying guide explaining how leaders should utilize these materials. I thought nothing of this until two months later when I received the letter.

The letter was from Marvin, a prisoner serving, he said, “life plus 30.” The language was simple and direct. “Dear Professor,” the letter began, “I’ve been looking at your books. They’ve been in the Legal Clinic office for a while. Two days ago I started reading them. First I was confused. But now I see how the leader’s guide can help you run the meetings. But we need someone to help us get started. Would you come meet with us? I talked to a few of the guys. We all think this would be good here. Nothing they give us here makes any sense. But last night six of us were sitting around. I read out loud the story about the old man asking for his dead son back. And we talked about it. We were thinking about it. How brave the old man was to face his son’s killer and what pain he felt.” I was startled as I read his account of a text in our Volume I—a text from Homer’s *Iliad*, in which the old king Priam begs the young warrior Achilles for the return of the dead body of his son Hector. He went on to say he hoped we could talk about how such a program might work in a prison.

Though I was stretched in my commitments with Touchstones’ efforts in public schools, with my normal teaching at St. John’s, and in my work with an executive group of investment bankers, CEOs, lawyers, and journalists up in New York, I couldn’t think of a sufficient reason to say no. In addition, I knew of a pilot program that had been tried at the New Mexico State Penitentiary where

the ghastly riot had occurred in 1981. I was intrigued by the idea of working with prisoners and I had hoped we could find a location closer to home. Each type of group we work with is unique. Each group brings specific talents to the program as well as specific needs. Each new effort is therefore a collaboration. The program that Marvin reviewed was designed for high school students, both for the gifted and for those who couldn't read. It was therefore a good first step. It seemed wrong not to answer the request.

However, in spite of my desire, I was hesitant. I was influenced by what the media reported about prisoners. I had the images of countless movies and the hostages at Attica in my imagination. I remembered the atrocities, the disembowelments, at the New Mexico prison outside of Santa Fe. I'm afraid I must admit that often in the early days I went into the prison because I couldn't think of a way to avoid going in without embarrassing myself. So in September of 1995, I took the thirty minute drive to Jessup and entered a vast structure that from a distance looked like an ancient nineteenth century Liverpool textile mill, but on closer inspection was revealed to be a fortress designed to keep two worlds entirely separated from one another. It was a Tuesday evening when I crossed the barriers of double steel-and-glass doors and razor wire to meet the nine men who would embark with me on the exploration of a world that none of us knew existed. I was reminded of Plutarch's description of England before the Romans crossed the water from Gaul: a land that existed only in myth and legend. Over the next two years we would take the first steps together into unknown territory.

I would later realize that my entry on that day was remarkably efficient. My name was listed on a count out document at the first control booth and I was moved quickly

through sets of double doors where I saw chains, handcuffs, and shotguns in a glass-enclosed watch area. I walked nervously past interrogation and holding rooms to what was called the Main Control Area: a large cubical steel-barred enclosure filled with guards. Unlike other such enclosures in the prison, this one had the only exit route to the outside world. A corrections officer announced through a loudspeaker that we were exiting the cage—which, ironically, was the Main Control Area—and entering the actual prison. We were on the inside and surrounded by tiers of cells and the sound of the movement of a thousand men. I was escorted by a guard up a flight of stairs past a hundred men descending from their cells. At moments I was lost in the crowd but with great effort moved through the confusing mass of people upstream. After a brief and nervous wait at a landing, a metal door opened into a large space, perhaps thirty by seventy feet, in which another guard sat at a small desk.

The meeting took place in a small room at the edge of this large activity area where we would eventually hold our sessions amidst the 100-decibel noise of the prison and the rival claims for space of the Nation of Islam and the Jessup Jaycees. Around the open area were a number of these rooms, allocated to the use of various prisoner organizations. There was the writer's club, the prisoner newspaper, the colts—a sports club whose allegiance now focused on birds—orioles and ravens—instead of horses. There were the rooms for AA and NA, and the fifteen- by ten-foot area where men who had expressed themselves by crime now used brushes and paints. We met in the room of the most important prisoner organization—the Legal Clinic. This was where the men came for advice from other more experienced prisoners on how to represent them-

selves, since whether guilty or innocent their previous defense rarely warranted the name.

It was significant that we met here since this was where prisoners most felt the distance between themselves and the world outside the walls. This was where they experienced most acutely their helplessness in the subtle labyrinth of our society's legal system. Five of the men I met were the high priests of this order. They were the officers—present and past—of the Legal Clinic. They held the keys to help others at least attempt to control their futures. The four others were equally important. They were presidents of other prisoner organizations. These were all older men, men who had somehow survived the years of indignity and abuse and isolation. The youngest was in his late thirties and all but one were serving at least one life sentence, whereas most were serving multiple such sentences either concurrently or in succession. These were men for whom prison was to be their world and not merely an interlude before reinserting themselves into ours.

I was clearly nervous as I entered and they had me sit in a part of the small room where I was no longer seen by the guard in the main area. The meeting began awkwardly. I thought they knew what they wanted from my visit, but in fact some were only vaguely aware of why they were meeting. Marvin began by having us go around the room and state who we were. I said I was a teacher, and others spoke briefly about themselves. They never said it explicitly, but each said enough for me to infer that I was sitting with nine men convicted of murder, concealed from a guard in a small room. When we finished Marvin, took the lead again. "Why don't you tell us about the program," he said in a voice filled with suspicion. I had thought that he would be my ally in this alien world but his tone was dis-

tant, as if he now wished to appear that he had played no part in my coming into the prison. From the introductions, it became clear that half were invited to this meeting to hear about the program for the first time. I could see a couple of the men whispering to one another and even heard one ask to no one or to all why I was there. Rather quickly the roles had become reversed. Instead of being asked to come to respond to their request, it seemed that I had to convince them that they should become involved.

I could feel control slipping away from me. Perhaps it was implicitly a test to see if one more white volunteer could offer something they really wanted, or perhaps it was an exploration they were undertaking to find out what they needed. When they asked me to describe the program, I did a very poor job. I kept speaking in ways that were either too abstract or too rudimentary. I hoped to interest them in probing the conceptual presuppositions and biases of our culture though I didn't describe it in quite those words. However, such an exercise hardly moved them since, for many, their incarceration incorporated the presuppositions and biases of our culture. Of all the men I met in prison, very few asserted their innocence. However, most felt that they were political prisoners, prisoners because of the politics of our country stretching back into the very origins of the European conquest of the New World. They didn't offer this as an excuse but merely reported it as a fact. They saw their crimes much along the lines of an infraction against their master on the plantation. Nor were they particularly engaged by the prospect of increased skills. The skills they needed were quite specific, and it wasn't clear how Touchstones could help them overturn a conviction.

As I was speaking and becoming more uneasy as I

felt their eyes glued to me, a short heavily tattooed prisoner interrupted. “These guys,” he said, referring to the collection of texts he had, “are all white.” I was taken aback by his claim. In regard to the specific volume I had sent in, he was correct. I again started trying to explain that this program was very different from classes they had in school and that the Eurocentrism of this particular collection of texts wouldn’t affect what we discussed. But they looked skeptical. The meeting seemed to be going nowhere until Marvin looked up from fingering the book of readings. “It could help us think for ourselves,” he said calmly. “That’s something they can’t control.”

Immediately, I could see their faces change as if they finally heard something that might be useful or even important. “You think that? Say more,” said Lee, the president of the Legal Clinic whose great knowledge earned him the respect of everyone in spite of a terrible stutter. “Yeah, it’s like when we talked about that dead guy. That Trojan. And you asked us how we would mourn a friend. There was no one to tell us who was right and what to say. We were all thinking.” A few of the most senior nodded agreement and the others, even the tattooed critic, seemed to concur. That remark finally penetrated to the core of their concerns. Perhaps Marvin had sensed this in the description of the discussion format. Perhaps these experts in the omnipresence of arbitrary control sensed an opportunity for the first time to undertake the pure act of thinking. Perhaps my own inability to supply an answer allowed them the leisure to determine what they needed. In their eyes, I was no longer a professor or a teacher of the kind they had previously experienced. I was merely a technician who could help them create the structure through which their own thought would take shape.

“Thinking for oneself” was no simple expression for them. Within that phrase was lodged the full dimension of their suffering. In prison, all control and initiative was stripped from them. After one session in which we discussed Martin Luther King’s *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* and why we need the stability of laws, Eddie, a lifer who had served 25 years, took me aside out of the hearing of the others. “Here you’ve got to be careful. Yeah, even you. They change the rules every day. And they never tell you. That way they control all of you.” To supply the desperate need they felt to establish a realm in which they were not entirely passive, they had two options. He took me further aside as if to confide a great truth about his life. “We try to fight it. We work out with weights in the yard or in the gym. That way we at least control how we look. Or we control the fags and the slaves.”

An entire hierarchy of keeper and kept appears in the prison. The keepers tell the kept what to do, how to act, and what to think. Their thoughts are as imprisoned as their bodies, since the constant pressure of others establishes a tyranny which overrides the distinctions of guard and prisoner. Control in its rawest form flows through the prison, and it was this horror that these men felt our programs might transform. The task was now clear: to go about establishing the conditions for prisoners to reassert their freedom, their ability to become human again, by bestowing significance on their lives through the mere act of thought.

By the end of the meeting certain things were clear. I had committed to coming in every Friday evening for two hours, though we never had that much time. Security always dictated how long it took to enter. Sometimes I would be held in a control area for an hour only to be told

the paperwork couldn't be found. This was always exasperating; however, when I once complained to the group about it, they just laughed. Roderick, one of the older prisoners, explained, "We were hopin' it would happen. It's good for you. It'll help you understand something about here." From then on I sometimes even savored the delays as it revealed in a trivial and temporary way what the prisoners experienced continually. I began to grasp what it meant no longer to be a person but a mere thing. These men had no control over their lives. I too felt that every time I entered the facility. It was as if I had entered another world where I had no standing and no say in what might happen to me. It was a separate world, barely lit and chaotic. Anything could happen in those dim passageways as I walked past the correctional officers and groups of prisoners. My only security was the hope that it wasn't worth their effort to interfere with me.

Control as it is implemented and experienced in our prisons is a uniquely modern construct. In contrast to ancient prisons, our prisons reduce men to beasts through controlling and dehumanizing measures. Although ancient prisons were dark and oppressive places where vermin, neglect, and disease dominated, prisoners were not dehumanized. Those vast ancient structures held people of various sorts, often in accommodations that suited their relative rank. Prisoners still retained respect, and in some cases the accoutrements of their position in society. The ranks the prisoners held were part of them and could not be stripped from them whatever their crime or infraction. However, this began to change as religion and science struggled for our souls. Prisons in a temporary compromise became penitentiaries, places where fallen human beings would do penance and assert their humanity again.

These people were still not fundamentally different from those who would confess their sins in prayers during church services. The distinction was only that they required a more intense regimen of prayer in places where there were fewer distractions from the work of their salvation. However, as religion lost its primacy to scientific technology, the penitentiary became the house of correction.

Some of the group, a few who had served over forty years in prisons in many different states, could actually remember this change. Once we were considering a drawing as a text and suddenly we heard the story first hand. The text was a drawing by Kathe Kolwitz, *Prisoners Listening to Music*. The three prisoners depicted are skeletal, with hollow eyes—and all seemingly gripped by something. The session was not going very well and I regretted trying to use a text that connected too vividly with their situation. A number of the younger members were clearly repulsed by the drawing. When I asked why a few who spoke often were silent, Larry answered. “It’s scary looking at them. I don’t want that to be me.” As he finished, another prisoner, Craig, a man almost seventy years old who first served time more than fifty years before, laughed. “You don’t understand nothing. They’re not dying. They’re gettin’ past their hungers. It’s the music that makes them pure—like angels. Listen—when I was young down south we had a chaplain. Every day he would play music for us. Old music, beautiful. At first we couldn’t listen to it. We never heard nothing like it. Sometimes a song would last a long time, no words. But then we started to love it. We would listen like in the picture, and we’d remember things. And we’d cry. Sometimes you could hear ten men cry. And sometimes the priest would cry too. We were all together in it. But then he retired and a new chaplain came. He was

different. He wanted us to see the doctors and counselors—the case workers. They would ask us questions about ourselves and make us go to classes, programs. They were working on us and the music ended. It was different. It was them against us.” Correction, as Craig sensed, is entirely different from penance.

This is one reason why the allegory of the cave from Plato’s *Republic*, one of the most powerful Touchstones readings for any group, is especially fertile in a prison. The status of the modern prison as its own self-enclosed world became explicit in a session in which the prisoners discussed this text. It is a story of people who are themselves prisoners in a barely illuminated cave and who believe the shadows they see cast by objects that move behind them are reality. Eight weeks into the program I decided use this text to encourage the prisoners for the first time to speak explicitly in the group about their own situations as prisoners. For a while they argued about details of the allegory but finally Thomas, a serious and highly intelligent prisoner, moved the discussion to their own reality. He started to consider how a freed prisoner from Plato’s cave who saw the reality outside would communicate with those who were still underground if he returned. To make his point about the difficulty of communication, he began to describe his own return to prison. “When I came back in,” he said, “I thought I’d find my old friends, and I’d talk to them. But I couldn’t. Nothing I said made any sense. I had to learn a new language.” Ken, who had been silent, agreed. “Nothing here makes sense out there. Nothing you would do out there works in here. It’s like going from earth to Pluto. They make us into aliens, animals, and then they wonder why we end up coming back to the barn.”

It was into this highly controlled and dehumanizing

space that I had entered in response to an appeal from nine lifers attempting to reestablish themselves as men who had committed crimes rather than as members of a separate species, a criminal class. Like the priest who played the music and cried with his prisoners, perhaps like Dostoevsky's Father Zossima crying for himself as much as for them, I was joining them on a journey we would have to undertake together.

Soon, the nine men decided to involve another ten so we would have a group of about twenty. They had to explain our goal to the others as best they could. The goal was a rare one in the prison. I would undertake to turn over control of the program to them so they could spread the program throughout the facility. In short, I wasn't—like other teachers or volunteers—coming to do something for them. Rather, I would try to make it possible for them no longer to need me. That is what all teachers want, but here it was essential that they not feel indebted to me. The program would only work if they felt it was also theirs—that they had collaborated in its creation. However, I knew that it would be as difficult for me to surrender control to them as it would be for them to accept it. I created the program they would learn. I felt I knew better than they what would work and what structure was best. Yet to succeed I would have to enable them actively to collaborate with me in shaping the program for prisons. I was worried that I might not be able to achieve this act of surrender. And would they be able to forget who I was and allow me to be involved without feeling I was judging them, that I was the expert and therefore in control of the situation? Here we were touching on some of the deepest issues of our culture, ones that pervaded both the prison and also our own lives—issues of the need for control, the fear of

surrender, and the very ownership of one's words.

Every discussion group confronts the same set of barriers to a genuine collaborative activity. There are always initially the issues of control, power, and expertise. This initial stage is followed by competition among groups—in other words, factions—who struggle with each other to assert dominance. This happens by groups and individuals. The next barrier is the problem of listening without imposing our own thoughts on another. After overcoming these impediments, there is the effort one must make to evolve a type of leadership and responsibility that is shared among all the participants. These issues raise the most complex human problems and questions irrespective of culture. The culture determines how the group approaches these problems but not what the barriers are.

In addition to these problems, there are others that characterize a group or the individuals in it as a unique collection of people immersed in a specific institutional or social environment. These problems concern all of us in some measure, but specific groups face certain problems continually as a fact of their lives and their circumstances. They have an expertise in that area, as a problem they must continually face, which the rest of us share to a lesser and more occasional extent. They can therefore become a resource for us all as they struggle in the discussion environment to overcome that barrier that uniquely affects them and shapes their lives. The prisoners had their own specific complex needs, needs that centered on the issue of control and their attempt to overcome the passivity imposed by their violent and arbitrary environment. They had a hunger for control. However, in order to create a genuine group, they would have to transmute this desire into a form

that enabled them to surrender control in its customary forms. It was with regard to such issues that they could most clearly be a resource for others.

Prisoners also certainly need the intellectual skills and the skills of cooperation to better equip them to enter society as employable people. However, the needs expressed by these prisoners had a different urgency. These nine men were to spend their lives in prison, and their needs dealt not with the future but with the environment in which they all lived. Their needs were three-fold.

The first involved the fact that MHC, like all prisons, was overcrowded. There was a certain freedom of contact and movement simply because there was not enough space to keep prisoners separated. This mobility of course increased the possibility of collisions among prisoners or gangs of prisoners. Through spreading Touchstones in the prison, the men aimed gradually to change the environment where they all lived. A modest success was recounted one evening after one of the discussions. We had just discussed the opening scene of Ellison's *Invisible Man* where the "invisible" narrator collides with a white man and comes close to killing him. During the session they had mostly considered their prejudices, their assumptions about one another. However, near the end of our time, Alan, a white man, spoke up more personally. "This happened yesterday. I was on line at lunch, carrying my tray. James [a black man who sometimes attended sessions] was in front of me. Don't know how, but I bumped into him. His lunch fell. Three months ago he would have hit me hard, maybe killed me. But he didn't, and we cleaned up the mess. And other people gave him some of their food. That's never happened here before." Lee, one of the leaders, seemed to speak for all of them, when he commented

on this incident. “They try to make us savages. And before we started talking to one another, we used to believe them.” In short, their startling goal was to humanize their world—a world in which they were viewed and viewed themselves as barely human.

Their second goal involved a peculiar paternal attitude toward the younger men. These men were old timers, men who had survived years of abuse and indignity from guards, and other prisoners. They knew how to remain alive. They were the wisest of the wise. Each of them was unique, and the only image that captured their stature for me was a comparison with the Greeks and Trojans of the *Iliad*: Ajax, Sarpedon, Patrocles, Achilleus, and Hector. These men hoped to influence the young ones, seventeen to twenty-five years old, who came for two or three years and then graduated, as if they had attended a college course in how to commit crimes. These young felons never grasped that they too might spend their lives behind these walls. The group of lifers felt that speaking directly wouldn't work. They hoped that their words would carry more weight after having worked together in these more neutral, though important, discussions.

The third dimension was the one that affected each of them most intimately. It wasn't just a matter of their environment or a concern for those who would follow the paths these men regretted having themselves pursued. Rather, it was the sense that they too, even in these hostile and precarious and dehumanizing conditions, were capable of thinking on the deepest issues that confront all of us. This became vivid to me and to them one Friday evening. The text was a short passage by Kant on morality. He claims that we are moral only when we act from duty and not because we want to. Most of the group considered him

crazy. They gave example after example of helping others, family, friends, even enemies, because of pity or affection. Finally Sam interrupted. “You guys really don’t get it. He’s saying that what you’re talking about is only like eatin’ when you’re hungry. That’s no big deal. It’s only when it’s hard, when it hurts, and you do it anyway that you can respect yourself. Then you know you’re a man.” As he spoke I and others nodded in agreement. The intensity of Sam’s thought, exploring an idea that no one had been able to consider, enabled me and others to take Kant’s claims more seriously. In these sessions they felt they could finally exercise control over their own thoughts—they could, as Sam did and helped us do, think for themselves. This they sensed would once again make them fully human in their own minds and capable of respecting themselves as well as others.

The task we set ourselves was to create a group of about ten discussion leaders who then would each be able to conduct groups for other prisoners. The ultimate aim for the men was to involve as many prisoners as possible in the programs and to make these discussions part of the ongoing life of the institution. In addition, a collection of texts was to be selected and tried out for use in this prison as well as possibly in others. In this program and the other programs I have designed, the texts are understood as tools, as touchstones. Though they are sometimes specific to particular groups—like the Kolwitz drawing—most texts selected, like Ellison’s or Kant’s, touch so deeply on our habits and expectations and our past cultural and historical inheritance that they are useful for a wide variety of groups. In the case of the prison population we needed to determine what texts would enable the participants to consider the issues of real concern to them. At the same

time, the process should not force them into areas they would only approach in their own time. So it became necessary both to explore the problems these leaders would face as well as why certain kinds of texts were used. In other words, for the men to learn to lead a group meant for them to grasp to a certain extent the underlying structure of the program.

The men in the group were therefore a core of nine men who had committed to this project as well as a varying group of others who would join up merely to participate. These were sometimes men known to the other participants. However, prisoners sometimes joined up for one or two meetings and were not known to the men. In certain cases we knew that prisoners were asked to attend to inform prison officials and monitor what was happening. I never knew who these other occasional participants were. I never knew whether they were sent to disrupt the session either by another prisoner organization that objected to what was happening, or by the prison administration, or simply by a prisoner who might be angry at one of the other prisoners or at the idea of changing the status quo of the institution. However, uncertainty is built into the nature of the discussion process and these visitors exacerbated that aspect. It also made clear to me that in a discussion, one is never in control. In order to participate or lead one must realize that one is dependent on the other participants. This also made it obvious that a genuine discussion is not an event that is isolated from the environment or culture or organization in which it occurs.

The first stage of our work was to give the men the experience of a discussion. I used texts from the Touchstones series of volumes. These are contained in nine volumes ranging from works for third and fourth graders

through high schoolers and adults. These volumes, especially those for the middle and high school series, are also perfectly suitable for adults. The volume a group uses is rarely a function of reading level, since the program can be done orally, but rather a matter of experience with discussion. Our goal in high school in the first year of participation is for the participants to understand each stage of the process itself and, after twenty- to twenty-five sessions, to begin conducting the classes themselves. This became the model for what we wished to achieve in prison. In addition, each session was filmed. The video was copied and one of the copies was returned to the men. A typical session would involve my passing out a text which was read aloud, and having individual and small group work precede the discussion. The group would then reunite and I would lead the discussion. This would last about fifty to sixty minutes. Then I would break the discussion and for the last thirty minutes we would analyze what had occurred.

This was the procedure we pursued week by week. Often the analysis of the discussion process would drift back into the topic of discussion itself or the text. Once after a discussion using the short essay by Francis Bacon, *About Revenge*, James, one of the prisoners, interrupted an argument between two very assertive men about whether there had been dominance in the session. "Hey," asked James, addressing one of the men arguing in an innocent tone, "did anyone take revenge during the meeting?" For a few moments no one responded though a number of eyes turned to Michael, the man James seemed to address. Then Lee actually acknowledged that he had been tempted to respond to what he took as a slight but didn't. Finally, Michael spoke up. "I did. What Vaughn said rubbed me

wrong and I thought he knew that—so I went at him. It was stupid.” The group then returned to the text on revenge and Michael and Lee described how they had reacted in different ways, why one tried to get even and the other didn’t and how they felt about their actions. This moment was common in the sessions as reflection on the discussion dynamics often led us back to the subject itself. The process of discussion and the text echoed one another. In order for this to happen texts must be selected which exemplify the structures and attitudes of our society and institutions. The discussion then becomes a unique kind of cultural exploration, in which the presuppositions of the culture can be made visible and new forms of thinking and behavior can be explored.

The entire history of slavery was continually present in the prison. Jessup, like most American prisons, is filled primarily with black men—the descendants of slaves once again in something very like slave quarters. Not only are their cramped cells and chains reminiscent of slavery but as the state increasingly involves itself in various commercial enterprises in prisons we are once again witnessing the use of what is essentially slave labor. The entire drama and stage setting of incarceration duplicates the four hundred year history of slavery on this continent. Slavery, and the complete absence of control over one’s decisions, one’s future, and one’s life were clearly the issues that should be probed by these men. They, more than others, had an expertise which we lack in surviving while facing the paralysis, the passivity, imposed on them.

It is part of the aim of these discussions to ultimately enable the participants to discuss the most vital and volatile issues. However, no one is prepared to undertake this without the skills which the program develops. It is only quite

late in the process that texts are dispensed with and topics themselves confronted. When that occurs prematurely the result is mere conflict or a series of monologues. It requires great discipline to undertake a genuine discussion of what one cares deeply about. Thus, though slavery was at least one of the main concerns of this group, its discussion as a topic would not occur until much later. We would approach it through the mediation of specific texts until the group became more skilled. Every group has certain issues like this and these will come up in the process itself, in the experiences the group has in their lives, and in the institutional structure within which they live.

I therefore selected texts at various stages which would push aspects of the issue of slavery to the surface. The choice of a passage from Epictetus' *Manual* was a first attempt. The passage is a terse statement of stoicism, a very abstract claim about slavery and freedom which holds that we are all enslaved, and that only by desiring what is completely and entirely in one's control could anyone be free. Epictetus goes on to claim that only our thoughts and opinions are entirely in our control. This, he argues, is because all people for whom we might feel love or affection and all property we possess or desire could be lost through some unpredictable event. The discussion of this text occurred about two months into the program.

It was a large group of about thirty that Friday night and the shape of the arrangement of chairs had departed far from a circle, which is preferred, and had become a very elongated ellipse. The configuration of the chairs often plays a key role in a discussion, since everything in a format like this has significance. I wanted to modify the shape of the ellipse and make it more uniform but I hesitated. I always felt I should accept the circumstances that

presented themselves in the prison as much as possible. Whether one manipulates the seating arrangement depends on the setting, the group, and the leadership role. Leading a discussion is not a uniform task. There is not one model that all must adhere to in every situation. The goals remain the same across groups of the same kind but how one achieves them can vary considerably.

I was at pains to make few demands on the situation and on the men in it. I didn't wish to be perceived as part of the organizational structure that moves them from place to place. When a prisoner would run the group, he would exercise much more control and direction than I did. It makes sense for that approach since he needs to demarcate himself as an expert in the initial phases whereas I wanted to minimize that status. This is the great issue confronting this effort to create a genuinely collaborative activity. People want an expert who will take control and yet wish to be free of that very desire. So the question is how one should share leadership and authority. That of course is a problem that will face all of us in every aspect of life. These discussions therefore are a laboratory in which the new directions to be pursued in our society can be explored and worked out.

I sat on the long side of the ellipse where I could best see all the men. Many men were new. There were three foci to the discussion. One group was led by a large man named Karem, who sat at one of the endpoints of the major axis—a dominant place in such a configuration. Karem agreed with Epictetus. He contended that the prison had enslaved his body but his mind was free. He argued that they couldn't enslave that. "No one can chain my mind," he boasted. "Though my body is locked in this sewer, my mind can roam everywhere." He spoke in such

a forceful way that many men, in spite of themselves, agreed. Kevin, on the other hand, violently disagreed. The officers didn't just control his body. By controlling that, they controlled him. They determined when he could move and where he could be. And these decisions controlled his life, his desire, his thoughts, and his dignity. While Karem held that he still felt free, Kevin vividly described what had happened to all of them—a need to urinate while waiting somewhere in the prison. “And,” said Kevin, “they take their damn time. They know what’s happening. They can read our faces, and we’re forced to humiliate ourselves. They turn us into children or animals.” Such an indignity can happen at any moment and to deny one’s feeling about that is not to be free but rather to be less than human, Kevin went on to claim.

Karem tensed at this point as if someone had said the very words he felt characterized both his and all their positions and which they were striving to change by their own efforts. Sometimes it is difficult to lead a discussion because what is said grips everyone with the reality of the lives of some of the participants. Even with experienced leaders, when a discussion becomes deeply real to the participants it is difficult for the leader to focus on the long-range goals of the project. Here I was listening to a discussion of Stoicism by people who didn't merely speculate and imagine what it would be like. These were people whose very survival and sanity often depended on their living that way. Some people in that room were in fact stoics and could speak to Epictetus as if they were colleagues on the same path. Others knew the temptation to stoicism and perhaps had tried it and abandoned it.

It is this facet which gives such power to discussions that are designed to use text and experience to echo one

another. This fertile tension between the experience of the group and the text reveals how such discussions differ so radically from both education in the traditional sense, in which an idea or text is explored and elaborated, and also from therapy, in which what is at issue is the experience of the particular participant. Here the personal is mediated by a text which is often the seminal source of a concept or institutional structure and yet through its difference from the personal allows one to view oneself from a distance. In fact, this very issue itself came up in the discussion on Epictetus and soon became the main focus. One of the men—Eddie, a former Black Panther who was a lifer but always proclaimed his innocence—brought this home to all of us. “None of us are free. We’re all enslaved,” he said, breaking a brief moment of silence between Kevin and Karem. “And not just those like us in prison. Yeah, we’re held in place by bars and wire, but that’s not all. Our minds themselves are enslaved. And not just ours, Howard’s too and everyone out there. Our thoughts aren’t our own. They’re just the ones we grew up with. How can we be free when how we think is our prison?”

This took everyone aback. Everyone realized this was an important thought that we would have to continually consider and struggle with. Eddie’s remark defused the tension between Karem and Kevin by revealing how this issue of our slavery was the struggle we all had to face. The men bounced all these ideas around as if they were in a three sided tennis match. No one changed an opinion but each gave the others the chance to speak. And this session was decisive for the group because they finally recognized, as Eddie implied, that I had nothing more to offer on this subject than they had, and in fact less. After an hour I broke off the discussion so we might evaluate what had

just happened.

In order to encourage people to emerge briefly from the prisons in which Eddie claimed we were all captive, I wanted the men to spend time with prisoners they didn't know. I asked the men to count to four and get into small groups according to number. That would effectively separate friends from one another, and I instructed them to consider what they felt were the strong and weak points of the discussion. When these groups reported their analyses, most of the groups agreed. They felt there had been a presentation of views but no discussion. As Vaughn said, "no one changed an opinion, and no one looked at what they themselves were saying. We were just stating our minds." But Thomas responded: "That isn't so terrible. At least we could finally say what we really thought. And the rest of us listened even if we didn't react. That was important. Others listening—we get some dignity that way," he claimed. A number of men agreed.

But then Karem, who had been listening with a clear expression of discomfort, interrupted. "But that means you need others to be free. And how could this Epictetus be right about being free in your thoughts when we need one another for our own self-respect? And don't you need self-respect for freedom?" It was there in the meta-discussion that the real discussion finally occurred. It was when they had made the claims of stoicism visible to themselves in their very activity that they could seriously consider the implications. The discussion did in fact act as an experiment for discerning new forms of activity.

There was no official status in my position, and the men received nothing for their participation. There was nothing concrete they would gain. I therefore had no power to bestow anything obviously useful or valued in

that environment. The men came because they were allowed to think. The excitement of thinking and knowing that they too were capable of this activity drew them into the group. They weren't here to learn from a book but to explore, together with me, both themselves and this new terrain we were bringing into being. Discussion is possible only when there is no agenda. I had no agenda in terms of the conclusions we would reach or the paths we would take though I clearly had a goal. I wanted to tailor the program to this institution. This meant I would try out texts, and explore the means by which I could turn over the responsibility for the program to these men. Often they would ask me about our other programs and I would tell them about the possibilities and the difficulties we faced in the program with Palestinians in Gaza in Arabic, or indentured children in Haiti, or CEO's at the Harvard Club, or middle school students, or senior citizens, or with plebes at the Naval Academy, or with my students at St. John's. I think it was very important to these men to realize that what they were doing was identical in some of its fundamental principles with attempts throughout the world by people who were willing to risk high levels of uncertainty to undertake the effort to change themselves.

It was the start of a sort of community where we—there in the bleak activity area of a nineteenth century prison, in the third floor private meeting room at the Harvard Club in Manhattan, in senior citizen centers, and in Haitian churches—were taking steps to explore a world which, though continuous with strands of all of these disparate worlds, nonetheless revealed glimpses of other forms of life and new ways of being and thinking. It happened briefly but often enough to present the outlines of possibility. The men knew they were explorers into a re-

gion no one knew about. The trips to space were not the successors of the trips of Columbus and Magellan. Those early explorers needed to change their fundamental conception of their world in order to make room for what they saw. The astronauts merely solved the typical problem of how to get from one visible and relatively known place to another though on a more immense scale. The problem we faced was not one of going from here to there but from now to then. It was exploration into a future which would no longer be a corollary of our pasts.

These men serving life sentences for serious crimes felt part of the small bands of people making these journeys and they sensed they were bringing a perspective that was uniquely theirs but necessary to all the others. This sense, I think, translated into their respect for me in spite of the fact that I was merely one more among them, a person who knew a bit about sketching a rough map of our explorations and who had an acute sense of apparent harbors that were merely the temptations of sirens. However, neither I nor they could give a detailed account of this new terrain. Sometimes I thought we were on solid ground and in a familiar region when suddenly the ground would open up and I found myself, as in the conventional dream, falling endlessly with no place to grab. And then just as suddenly the scene transformed and I could see that I was in a pacific valley and the fall was merely a misperception. I constantly had to seek my bearings along with the men, and that made vivid the reality of our mutual dependence.

Up to this point I had led the discussions, selected the texts from the Touchstones series, and designed the meeting format. But since our goal was for the core group to develop the skills necessary to lead discussions with other prisoners, I knew at some stage I would have to turn

over the responsibility to them. I must say I kept postponing the step. I kept worrying that I hadn't communicated enough to them, as if one could prepare for every eventuality in any complex activity, much less a discussion which, if properly engaged in, changes from moment to moment with a life of its own. However, I also recognized that these were merely excuses to avoid surrendering control. I was finally able to overcome my resistance because of what the prisoners were able to do. We were moving to a stage in the program in which the group must begin to observe and judge itself.

In all the programs I have developed, the text, the experience of the participants, and the dynamical issues arising in the process all interpenetrate and echo one another. To prepare the way for self-judgment and self-criticism of the group we first discussed a worksheet which drew out the opinions of the men on how one judges others at first meeting. The men were asked if they considered peoples' clothes, how people sit or hold themselves, or their eyes when meeting someone for the first time. In a prison judging correctly at first meeting is a very important event as it can determine whether one is threatened or safe.

Two men sharply disagreed on the best way to accomplish this. Idrus asserted it was by the person's posture, whereas Eddie focused on the eyes as the most revealing. This exchange went on for a few minutes, and we could see Eddie becoming increasingly impatient. Idrus was wearing dark glasses and Eddie, annoyed, finally said what he had been thinking: "What's behind those glasses?" In response Idrus tensed, started to rise, but then remained seated and replied. "You've known me here for twenty years and you've never seen that." The moment was explosive and I quickly moved it on to the text for that day

to re-establish control. They reconsidered this issue of self-observation and self-judgment by discussing two self-portraits of Rembrandt, one in which he concentrates on his eyes, and another in which he elaborates his clothing with the eyes almost invisible in darkness. The discussion got past that moment of tension to consider how Rembrandt had changed in how he depicted himself.

The next week, Idrus—the prisoner who had worn the dark glasses for twenty years—came to the session without them. We were all stunned. All of us spoke haltingly as the session began, hardly able to absorb the momentousness of his action. This appeared such a monumental step that I felt I should follow suit. I felt in awe of what had just occurred and the others all appreciated the extraordinary gesture they were witnessing. I immediately changed what I had planned for the session. I resolved that I would surrender control to the group the following week, and to begin that process in this session I decided to explore with them what we would consider. I began encouraging the group to think through the issues involved in leading a group.

A discussion leader always comes to a session with a goal. The goal can be a topic that it is deemed essential the group discuss, or a problem the group must overcome, such as dominance by a few, or an opportunity in the group's development, or a part of the text that seems important. The leader might have to surrender this goal immediately if it becomes clear that the group will not go along with this approach, or that they are ready for a different goal. In this case it was I, the group's leader, who was finally ready for something more significant.

After almost a year of hesitation, I was finally ready to collaborate with them, to surrender control. I therefore

asked them to consider what topic we as a group should discuss. For an hour they suggested various subjects but the main one was “What is God?” Some claimed that this was far too personal and sensitive to discuss, others claimed that the group was capable of attempting it. Some then claimed it wouldn’t be a discussion where one might change one’s mind. Instead they would simply state their opinions, indifferent to what the others might say. However, in spite of their reservations, they were willing to attempt it. At the end of the session we chose a text that we could use to focus our exploration. The text chosen was a selection in a Touchstones volume—the sacrifice of Isaac from Genesis. The session had been so penetrating in examining what constituted a discussion, what role texts can play in channeling the exploration, and how to avoid having it turn into an empty ping-pong match of quotes and scattered opinions, that I also decided that for the first time it would be led by one of the prisoners.

I could have chosen any of the group but Michael Evans-el volunteered. A thirty-five year old prisoner, he had been serving a life sentence since the age of fourteen when he was sentenced as an incorrigible offender. Michael began quietly. He asked: “What sort of God would make such a request?” There was silence for a few moments and then first Eddie and then Thomas and then Lee all plunged into the discussion to shed light on the mystery of God’s purposes. For ninety minutes, Michael led a discussion on the difference between sacrifice and murder and the role of God in our lives with a group of men all of whom had either committed murder or were at least convicted of it. And they identified even more closely with Abraham. As Vaughn pointed out, “We here must constantly ask ourselves just what Abraham must have

asked himself during that three day trip to Mt. Moriah: why me, God, why me?" Though there was a text one could not determine whether this was a textual or non-textual discussion. They had finally achieved that intermediate point in which the distinction breaks down. The following week we spent a good part of the session discussing what had occurred and whether their expectations were satisfied. Had it been possible to discuss these subjects or were they simply presenting monologues? Everyone agreed that their worst fears had not materialized. In fact, the discussion was a great surprise even to those who expected that we were able to pursue it. As one of the men said, "It was like a wheel, it just moved round and round."

These men were discussing the issue most personal to them—the murder of another human being. Yet they had the discipline to depersonalize their own experience and allow others to participate in a discussion. They could surrender control of what was most intimate, and yet at the same time they never made it an abstract discussion. They were able to fuse a textual exploration with one in which their own experience lent credibility to their comments.

The session on the sacrifice of Isaac was a decisive moment for the group. It was a great success, far greater than I or they or anyone could have imagined. They felt that with some advance preparation one of them had been able to conduct a session. It was in fact a session on a topic—what is God?—that most felt they wouldn't be able to handle. However, it went much further. It was a discussion of the very crime for which they were serving life sentences. The discussion was thoughtful and probing with neither any self-pity nor any avoidance of self-examination. Once we began this process we decided to continue. The next week we decided we would have another leader

and would go in rotation until each of the nine men had practiced with this group. This was a major step. I also thought it was better to allow the leader to know in advance and for him to be able to select the text and the approach. The next volunteer was Vaughn, a prisoner who had played a very strong role in the last discussion. Michael, who had led the discussion, had the best sense of how to keep himself out of the way. I knew others would have more difficulty.

It is always a challenge to lead a group. Leading has little to do with whether you enjoy discussions yourself. In fact often the worst leaders are precisely those who want to be participants. However, there is no one model for conducting a discussion. One has to discern one's strengths and utilize those within this new environment. Vaughn's great strength as a participant in fact would, I expected, cause him problems as a leader. There was great seriousness and intensity in Vaughn. In a discussion he often took the group to new levels by his passionate thinking about a problem. In the Abraham discussion, when the discussion was becoming fragmented, Vaughn focused it on what we all knew we should talk about. He imagined Abraham, walking with Isaac those three days. He uttered what everyone in the group was asking about Abraham and themselves, "God, why me, why me?" It was Vaughn who could suddenly transform a meandering route into one of deep engagement. As one prisoner at a different prison said of a discussion on the *Iliad*, at some point it left the streets of Troy for those of Baltimore. Vaughn could effect that translation too. But this very power could also cause problems.

It is wonderful when a participant further raises the depth and importance of a discussion. But when a leader

does it, the group can become dependent on his enthusiasm or defensive and even go into opposition. A leader must rather show that he respects others and feels that the issues they have raised are serious. Vaughn was also not generally attentive to the needs of others in the group. He was not vain at all but simply so engaged by the question or topic that he would lose a sense of where the others in the group were in their thinking. Each of the men had different kinds of issues they would have to face as leaders but Vaughn's was one of the most difficult. He would have to subordinate his own ideas and help others to bring out theirs. He would have to surrender control of the content and focus on his responsibility to others. If anyone had to learn service it was he. I also had to let him choose the text.

What he chose startled and troubled me even more than the fact that he would lead it. It was a piece by an eighteenth century ex-slave about what owning slaves does to the slave owner. In one sense it was potentially useful because it at least took a perspective that the group of twenty black men had to infer. But as touching so directly on the topic of slavery it seemed beyond the ability of this group, much more so than the question about God. I was amazed that this was the text chosen though I had resolved there was nothing I would do to change it. They had to learn to select texts for a specific group at a specific time in their evolution and this was at least a start. And I had to learn to surrender my position and become a participant in the group. I hoped we could analyze it afterward in order at least to decide why it failed. The analysis would present an opportunity to explore the role of texts and how one selects them.

I decided I would sit next to Vaughan, thinking that

way at least I might control how much he spoke. Though the previous week had been so disciplined, this discussion collapsed within moments. The first question took us far from the text onto the issue of why whites enslaved blacks. All the issues with enslavement and abuse came up and the group could hardly sustain any exchange at all. Within minutes I sensed that we were near an abyss. The few whites in the room tried to speak but were not even listened to seriously. Some got up and left the circle, angry at what was happening. However, most eventually returned and sat down again since there was no place else for them to go. Even the blacks began to attack one another. And all the alliances that had developed broke down. I felt I had no idea where we were going, no idea whether the group could hold together for the hour or whether I would have to break it off if they allowed me. At that moment I was certain that the effort and the accomplishment of a year was really an illusion. The session seemed endless as person after person spoke. The area became electric when Arthur “Shaka” Wiggins said that in 1975 he was born a slave in Baltimore and his life would be devoted to becoming free. I remained silent, unable to speak after my one contribution was ignored.

After an hour, Vaughn suddenly broke it off, saying we had to move on. I was relieved that we had all survived this experience, and was ready to pack up and depart feeling that I had failed in this entire effort. But before I could close out the session, in a very steady voice Vaughn asked each person to reflect on the activities of the previous hour—what were the strong and weak points, was it a discussion, was it a success or a disaster, and how could it have been improved? I was startled both at what Vaughn had attempted at this stage and also at how the men re-

sponded. They were very circumspect and considerate in their comments. Both the whites and blacks spoke calmly about what had transpired—what they felt and why they thought they were not allowed to speak—even discussing why some men had left the circle. I didn't expect, at the end of that previous hour, that we could ever reconstruct the discipline they revealed the previous week. But after the discussion everything changed. They began to reflect on other aspects of the issue as if they were no longer expected to defend their people.

After about fifteen minutes during which they considered how Vaughn had conducted the session, someone abruptly broadened the issue. Stuttering, Lee asked whether anyone had ever tried to enslave someone in the prison, or even whether that had happened during the discussion. There was a long silence and I could see many moving nervously in their chairs. Finally Thomas acknowledged both. And within moments, as if finally given the freedom to speak openly, all entered the discussion as if they were no longer just the victims but also the perpetrators. They began to describe the complexity of their emotions as slave owners. They recounted how when they first enslaved someone on the tiers they felt a power and sense of victory. They no longer felt imprisoned but human again. But then they began to feel the enslaved person to be a burden. Instead, only the free prisoners interested them. Their slaves were servile, willing to say or do anything they felt would ease their lot. These men here, all of whom were acknowledging themselves as slavers, wanted respect. They said they didn't want it from their slaves but from others—from one another. All felt that the moment they enslaved someone his respect was worthless and their own self-respect diminished. And others would

not respect them for such pointless conquests. After their first moment of euphoria, they said they felt debased and less human. And they began acting that way. It was again in reflecting on themselves and their discussion that the text Vaughn had chosen was finally explored.

As I drove back to Annapolis that evening, I finally had an occasion to reflect on what I had just lived through. In the prison I had heard the genuine reality of a critical section of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*—the section on Lordship and Bondage. However, unlike Hegel's illusive and obscure abstractions these men felt in their flesh and in their lives the very failures chronicled in that pilgrimage. They too, as Hegel pointed out about all of us, felt the deep and fundamental urge to be recognized as human, as beings who were different from the rats and insects that populated their world. And they struggled to do that even in their most heinous acts. These men, enslaved by their past and their world, used others to attempt to break free, to display their humanity in an act of conquest, of being willing to die to assert themselves as lords over a cell block or over a part of the yard. And in the moment of success, of attaining complete control over a space and its inhabitants, they acknowledged feeling their sense of themselves slipping away into the emptiness. In addition, the very men whose submission and recognition was meant to guarantee their own mastery and control showed to them the futility of that recognition. By succumbing to these conquerors, those men showed they couldn't appreciate what the victor truly was and therefore couldn't offer him their acknowledgement and recognition. They—these victors—began to recognize themselves as slaves even in their moment of conquest. In Hegel's story of the progress of human awareness to its complete self-awareness, the master who conquers is a dead end. The story continues

through the trials and struggles of the slave. And it is self-discipline that shows the way to Hegel's all too joyous conclusion at the end of what he called the path of despair.

And here too was despair, here in these yards and the echoing corridors, and yet these men showed a self-discipline I didn't expect. They had gone further than I had imagined or could go myself. They no longer needed a text to mediate to themselves. For that brief period they spoke of their own pain and anger and humiliation and then in a remarkable display of self-awareness commented on their own strengths and weaknesses. Though the road here was not directed toward Hegel's rosy culmination of history nonetheless the step through this discipline once again revealed the route to oneself. As one of the men said—the one who declared he was born a slave in Baltimore in 1975—it was in these discussions that for the first time he found his voice. The men had achieved more than anyone could give them, something which the act of bestowal would itself destroy. These men had to find their own voices—they had to surrender the idioms of their age and class and race and gender and for the first time risk hearing themselves. They had to break free together from the prison Eddie pointed out that they and I and all others inhabited. These prisoners thanked the discussions for making that possible. Perhaps that was correct, but they made the discussions. The discussions weren't there waiting for them. And in this moment I realized what it meant for me to surrender control. The utmost that I could do was merely to set the stage for acts of courage I could admire but which it might never be my privilege to display. I left the prison realizing that for a brief moment I had seen in men confined to cells for their lives an example of mutual respect and recognition, of freedom, that the rest of us rarely achieve.