

In Jail

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First appeared in the Arch City Chronicle, 2006

I went to the jail to visit someone. A former drug user, recalled to jail for a warrant from another state. In jail, you wait and you wait and you wait. Even when you are visiting, you wait. The people who work at the jail, I noticed, move very slowly. What's the hurry? It's jail.

The rooms are unpleasant, even for guests. Everything is dirty, half the light fixtures are out and unreplaced. The chairs are all loose at the joints. They have all kinds of stuff stuck to them. Every surface has a filmy coating.

I found the jail an unpleasant place, even as a visitor. As I moved through the labyrinth of the jail to make my supervised visit, I glanced through the window of one of the doors and I saw the lock-up. There was a man in an orange suit standing in it. It was the same orange that the Buddhist monks of southeast Asia wear.

As I looked into the cell, I felt myself gulp a breath, how could you breathe in there, I thought, caged up that way?

I waited in a room with a half a dozen partitions, heavy glass, and phones like you see in the movies. I waited another twenty minutes. The person I was visiting came and sat down at the other side of the thick glass. He picked up the phone. He was also wearing an orange Buddhist monk costume.

"I hope you're not here to help me like every other hypocrite #%&*\$* I've met," he said by way of introduction.

I didn't know what he meant. The hypocrites I have known have never tried to help anyone. We started to talk about what got him into prison. I told him that I believed that drug problems are not about substances, they are about personalities that become attached to substances. It's about the emptiness within, the space into which we drink. It's about the emptiness into which we stuff drugs.

When we stop drinking, when we stop taking drugs, then we encounter the problem staring back at us in the mirror. We are now free to repair the problem. It's about the personality that became attached to drugs and alcohol. That's the big difference between not taking drugs and being sober. Sobriety you have to work for, it's hard work, because it's about the personality that became attached to the substance.

It's about attachment. We talked about attachment and the freedom of the personality liberated from such attachments, the freedom to work ourselves well, and sure enough, we began to sound like two Buddhists although only one of us

was dressed appropriately. There in jail, we began to hover over the thick glass which separated us, somewhere above the dirt we met and spoke the truth clearly and unjudgmentally to each other. I liked him, he liked me, but he's in there and I'm out here.

"What's it like to be in there?" I asked.

He began to tell me. "Not so bad. . .really, you get used to it. You carry your jail around with you, right?"

That's what we had been talking about all along. Some of us are out here but we carry our prison with us wherever we go, and likewise our freedom, because it's an inside job, jail, freedom, like sobriety, the work is inner. It's an inside job -- sobriety, freedom, prison -- we get what we work, we are our struggles. We are the freedom we seek. Or we are not.