

"Prison Studies" by Malcolm X

Born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, Malcolm X (1925-1965) was a charismatic leader of the black power movement and founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity. In prison, he became a Black Muslim. (He split with this faith in 1963 to convert to orthodox Islam.) "Prison Studies" is excerpted from the popular and fascinating *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which he cowrote with Roots author Alex Haley.

Many who today hear me somewhere in person, or on television, or those who read something I've said, will think I went to school far beyond the eight grade. This impression is due entirely to my prison studies.

I had really begun back in the Charlestown Prison, when Birnbi first made me feel envy of his stock of knowledge. Birnbi had always taken charge of any conversation he was in, and I had tried to emulate him. But every book I picked up had few sentences which didn't contain anywhere from one to nearly all of the words that might as well have been in Chinese. When I just skipped those words, of course, I really ended up with little idea of what the book said. So I had come to the Norfolk Prison Colony still going through only book-reading motions. Pretty soon, I would have quit even these motions, unless I had received the motivation that I did.

I saw that the best thing I could do was to get hold of a dictionary - to study, to learn some words. I was lucky enough to reason also that I should try to improve my penmanship. It was sad. I couldn't even write in a straight line. It was both ideas together that moved me to request a dictionary along with some tablets and pencils from the Norfolk Prison Colony school.

I spent two days just writing uncertainly through the dictionary's pages. I'd never realized so many words existed! I didn't know which words I needed to learn. Finally, just to start some kind of action, I began copying.

Handwritten: Handwritten words

Handwritten: a feeling of discontented of resentful longing aroused

Handwritten: of an animal make typically a hole or tunnel, typically not used as a dwelling

Handwritten: match or surpass, typically by imitation

Handwritten: to a great extent; extremely a small part of a whole

Handwritten: a nocturnal burrowing mammal with long ears

Handwritten: the art or skill of writing by hand

Handwritten: turn over something especially the pages of a book, quickly and casually

Handwritten: special importance value or prominence given to something

Handwritten: a close similarity connection or equality

Handwritten: certain to happen

Handwritten: especially of a replica of something of a much smaller size than normal; very small

Handwritten: to become larger in distance from side to side; wide

Handwritten: using to learn words monthly of knowledge words

In my slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my tablet everything printed on the first page, down to the punctuation marks. I believe it took me a day. Then, aloud, I read back to myself, everything I'd written on the tablet. Over and over, aloud to myself, I read my own handwriting.

I woke up the next morning, thinking about those words - immensely proud to realize that not only had I written so much at one time, but I'd written words that I never knew were in the world. Moreover, with a little effort, I also could remember what many of these words meant. I reviewed the words whose meanings I didn't remember. Funny thing, from the dictionary first page right now, that hardy springs to my mind. The dictionary had a picture of it, a long-tailed, long-eared, outgoing African mammal, which lives off termites caught by sticking out its tongue as an antelope does for ants. a mammal that feeds on ants and termites

I was so fascinated that I went on - I copied the dictionary's next page. And the same experience came when I studied that. With every succeeding page, I also learned of people and places and events from history. Actually the dictionary is like a miniature encyclopedia. Finally the dictionary's A section had filled a whole tablet - and I went on into the Bs. That was the way I started copying what eventually became the entire dictionary. It went a lot faster after so much practice helped me to pick up handwriting speed. Between what I wrote in my tablet, and writing letters, during the rest of my time in prison I would guess I wrote a million words.

Handwritten: In my slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my tablet everything printed on the first page, down to the punctuation marks.

Handwritten: As you can imagine, especially in a prison where there was heavy emphasis on rehabilitation, an inmate was smiled upon if he

Handwritten: I suppose it was inevitable that as my word base broadened, I could for the first time pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying. Anyone who had read a great deal can imagine the new world that opened. Let me tell you something: from then until I left that prison, in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge. Between Mr. Muhammad's teachings, my correspondence my visitors - usually Ella and Reginald - and my reading of books, months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life.

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I can't
retreat
I have to
be alone
during that
time.

demonstrated an unusually intense interest in books. There was a sizable number of well-read inmates, especially the popular debaters. Some were said by many to be practically walking encyclopedias. They were almost celebrities. No university would ask any student to devour literature as I did when this new world opened to me, of being able to read and understand.

I read more in my room than in the library itself. An inmate who was known to read a lot could check out more than the permitted maximum number of books. I preferred reading in the total isolation of my own room.

When I had progressed to really serious reading, every night about ten P.M. I would be outraged with the "lights out." It always seemed to catch me right in the middle of something engrossing. Fortunately, right outside my door was a corridor light that cast a glow into my room. The glow was enough to read by, once my eyes adjusted to it. So when "lights out" came, I would sit on the floor where I could continue reading in that glow.

~~absorbing~~ At one-hour intervals the night guards paced past every room. Each time I heard the approach footsteps, I jumped into bed and feigned sleep. And as soon as the guard passed, I got back out of bed onto the floor area of that light-glow, where I would read for another fifty-eight minutes—until the guard approached again. That went on until three or four every morning. Three or four hours of sleep a night was enough for me. Often in the years in the streets I had slept less than that.

I have often reflected upon the new vistas that reading opened to me. I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life. As I see it today, the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant and craving to be mentally alive. I certainly wasn't seeking any degree, the way a college confers a status symbol upon its students. My homemade education gave me, with every additional book that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness, and blindness that was afflicting the black race in America. Not long ago, an English writer telephoned me from London, asking questions. One was, "What's your alma mater?" I told him, "Books." You will never catch me with a free fifteen minutes in which I'm not studying something I feel might be able to help the black man.

Every time I catch a plane, I have with me a book that I want to read—and that's a lot of books these days. If I weren't out here every

a bulk or set of books giving information on many subjects or on many aspects of the subject and typically arranged alphabetically.

When "lights out," he would read until guards approach. He works so hard to learn new words. Ignorance by being able to study intensely sometimes as much as fifteen hours a day.

When "lights out," he would read until guards approach.

lot of a problem or illness) cause pain or suffering to, affect or trouble.

stimulated or pretended. insincere.

Reading had changed his life forever.

a pleasing view, especially one seen through a long, narrow opening.

(of an animal) having normal physical functions suspended or slowed down for

a group of people sharing a common profession or interests.