

When investigative reporters approach, many people now “lawyer up” quickly. “As a result,” Stern says, “instead of interviewing people, many investigative reporters spend hours upon hours preparing ques-

tions, which are faxed to attorneys . . . [who] then send back carefully worded responses.” That’s not much fun, and it’s another significant restraint on the media watchdog.

A Newshounds’ Utopia

“Imagine” by Liz Cox, in *Columbia Journalism Review* (Jan.–Feb. 2003), Journalism Bldg., Columbia Univ., New York, N.Y. 10027.

At many newspapers, it is, or once was, a hallowed tradition for spirited young reporters to gather after hours at a nearby bar to talk about their stories, gripe about their editors, and imagine how much better their paper could be. Updating this custom for the Age of Focus Groups, *Columbia Journalism Review* recently persuaded 67 young journalists from 18 papers around the country to get together in small groups to discuss their “Dream Newspaper.”

Meeting over half-priced beers on Chicago’s North Side, or in places such as the Elvis Room at Mama’s Mexican Kitchen in Seattle, the twentysomethings decided that one thing they don’t want is more “news” about J.Lo and Ben. “Newspapers assume our generation wants nothing more than fluff, 24–7 entertainment,” said one participant. “That is flat-out wrong.” Even so, the Chicago bunch, along with many others, want their Dream Newspaper “entertainment-heavy, but not at the expense of news.”

Some of the journalists’ ideas were fairly predictable. They would like more freedom to express their own viewpoints (“When

something is just blatantly one-sided or wrong, it would be nice to point it out,” said Anand Vaishnav, a 27-year-old *Boston Globe* education reporter), to be more “smart assed,” even more foul mouthed (“We’re a foul-mouthed generation,” argued Andisheh Nourae, a 29-year-old columnist for *Creative Loafing*).

But one desideratum advanced by the Dream Teams is quite surprising: more international coverage. “As it turns out,” writes Cox, an assistant editor at *Columbia Journalism Review*, “the young people in our groups—far from being disengaged or self-involved, as the prevailing wisdom goes—see themselves very much as part of a global community.” Along with breaking foreign news and diplomatic coverage, they would like more stories about foreign folk—“people who could be here, but just happen to be there,” as Leslie Koren, a 30-year-old writer for *The Record*, in northern New Jersey, put it. An example of what she craves: a *Boston Globe* story about local rock bands emerging in Afghanistan after the defeat of the Taliban.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Socrates’ Last Words

“Have We Been Careless with Socrates’ Last Words? A Rereading of the *Phaedo*” by Laurel A. Madison, in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (Oct. 2002), Department of Philosophy, Hunter College, 695 Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10021.

If all of Western philosophy is footnotes to Plato, then Socrates’ best lines are the epigraphs: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” “He is wise who knows he knows not.” “All of philosophy is training for death.” What to make, then, of his not-so-

quoteworthy final words: “Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget”?

This apparent “trivial concern with Crito’s unreliable memory,” as Madison, a doctoral student at Loyola University,

Chicago, puts it, concludes the *Phaedo*, the last of the trial and execution dialogues, rather oddly. In this beautiful—and frustrating—dialogue, Socrates speaks hopefully about the afterlife, admonishing his friends not to worry about death and explaining why they should even look forward to it. And so, Madison writes, “the sheer banality of Socrates’ last words pleads for the reader to search for their deeper significance.”

In the standard view, Socrates is deep—deeply gloomy. Asclepius is the god of healing; Friedrich Nietzsche thus imagines Socrates moaning, “O Crito, *life is a disease*,” the cock serving as remittance for the cure by death. Most philosophers concur. Socrates always talks up the life of the ascetic. The body hampers the mind and soul with its petty wants, needs, debilities, and imperfections.

That the founder of Western philosophy “denigrates our earthly existence and urges us to deny and repress our passions, instincts, desires, and drives” gives many an excuse to write him off. It doesn’t help that Socrates’ bathetic turn—seemingly pro-suicide—follows a spate of disturbingly unconvincing arguments. Had the barefoot philosopher OD’ed on hemlock sooner than we thought?

Madison thinks Socrates deserves more credit and suggests two ways to redeem the

passage. First, don’t read it literally. Socrates uses “death as a metaphor for conversion to philosophy.” The soul and the body are “metonyms for higher and lower ways of life.” Socrates calls for rejection not of the flesh but of what the flesh stands for. Instead of yearning for death and knowledge of the afterlife, he yearns for “a life characterized by justice, purity, and understanding”—a philosophical life. The appeal to Asclepius is to heal us of the bodily distractions from philosophy, so that we may attend to Socrates’ prized “care of the soul.”

Second, instead of translating the last words as “and do not forget,” Madison suggests “and do not be careless.” This makes sense: Socrates had worried most not about his friends’ memory but about “the lack of concern people showed for the state of their soul, and the careless way in which they allowed themselves to be consumed and corrupted by their baser desires and interests.”

So Socrates was no morbid, otherworldly type. He loved his family, his friends, the little pleasures of daily life, says Madison: “The life he calls us to is not a diminished life of denial and denigration, but an enriched and enhanced life—a noble life that is its own reward . . . for which we should give thanks.” A fitting start to any good philosophy.

EXCERPT

A Day for Rest

Whenever I dream of living in a society with a greater respect for its Sabbatarian past—a fantasy I entertain only with anxiety, since Sabbatarians have a long history of going too far—I think of something two rabbis said. Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, best known for his tales of the golem, pointed out that the story of Creation was written in such a way that each day, each new creation, is seen as a step toward a completion that occurred on the Sabbath. What was Creation’s climactic culmination? The act of stopping. Why should God have considered it so important to stop? Rabbi Elijah of Vilna put it this way: God stopped to show us that what we create becomes meaningful to us only once we stop creating it and start to think about why we did so. The implication is clear. We could let the world wind us up and set us to marching, like mechanical dolls that go and go until they fall over, because they don’t have a mechanism that allows them to pause. But that would make us less than human. We have to remember to stop because we have to stop to remember.

—Judith Shulevitz, a *New York Times* columnist, in *The New York Times Magazine* (March 2, 2003)