
VOICES

Building Critical Thinkers and Collaborative Leaders

Table of Contents

Touchstones in Prison: Two Views	1
Letter from a New Board Member	2
Hang Tough with Touchstones: A Visit to a Baltimore City School	3
Looking Forward: 2010 and Beyond	3
Reflection: On Touchstones' Reach	4

At the heart of every successful non-profit is a compelling mission and dedicated staff. They are the passionate force by which lives are changed and dreams of a better world are realized. At the head of every sustainable and viable non-profit is a board of directors, whose steady guidance, reliable counsel, and unfaltering leadership keeps the non-profit on course—regardless of the climate. Touchstones' board of directors has helped us to grow strategically and intelligently and to navigate successfully even in times of great uncertainty. This edition of *Voices* is dedicated to the Touchstones board of directors, who in their own words explain why Touchstones matters—to them and to the world. Their stories must be shared. And, in these brief accounts we hope you will recognize why our board commits its time, energy, dedication, and faith to sharing and furthering our mission. We, board and staff, mutually inspire one another as we experience the transformations that Touchstones assists people in making in themselves and for humanity.

-Howard Zeiderman, President

Touchstones in Prison: Two Views

by Gregg Steinberg

Opportunity creates unique experiences, and so when opportunity presents itself why not take advantage of it. Such was the case recently when Howard Zeiderman, President of the Touchstones Discussion Project, invited me and some fellow Board members to attend a Touchstones session at a maximum security prison on the outskirts of Baltimore. A strange setting for an organization which claims to "Build Critical Thinkers and Collaborative Leaders" you might say.

I have attended many Touchstones sessions over the years, however this was truly a unique experience. This session was certainly not unique in regard to the reading, the process, the interchange of ideas, the building on collaborative thinking, or the thought provoking commentary coming from ideas I had not contemplated. From that standpoint, this was a session and process I knew well. In fact it was all just the same, and if you read the transcript you would think the session had been held in a conference room at some private club in New York, Washington, or Chicago. The amazing and eye opening difference here was the setting—a circle of men, some who are lifers convicted of crimes you read about in the daily paper and wonder how or why, all of whom are incarcerated for violent offenses. The discussion was deep, concepts truly developed, interchange amongst the participants respectful, everyone spoke, intellectual thought ensued.

I could not help thinking that many of these men who were in this prison could all be successful in their own right—in the world outside the walls we found ourselves within—had it not been for one bad decision, or had they not been in the wrong place at the wrong time, or had they just lived in a different environment.

There was no doubt these men are all leaders in the community they are in; they have to think critically and certainly have to collaborate. There could not be a better place for a Touchstones program to take place.



After walking through a metal detector which will reject even an underwire bra—although I can't picture how an underwire bra could be turned into a weapon without one's complicity—then passing the poster guide to the tattoos of an astounding number of Mexican prison gangs, we entered the room where our Touchstones discussion would be held.

As our group of about six board members and 20 prisoners sat in chairs in a circle, Howard read a Montaigne paragraph on the thrill of conversation: how Montaigne relishes disagreement in discussion and values conversation more than sight. In small groups we came up with questions to open the discussion, such as whether you could actually respect a person whose ideas you don't agree with. Then began one of the most provocative discussions I have ever been involved in. It quickly left the safe realm of the abstract with prisoners bringing up compelling, concrete examples and questions. One man asked if you could really talk with someone who believed one race was better than another. Another asked, "What If I told you I believed that women should be lightly beaten?"—a question that certainly makes you wonder how you can deal with a point of view you in no way share.



The hour flew by. The discussion was spirited yet disciplined, honest, and enlightening. One of my most stunning realizations came later when I learned that one particularly articulate, well-read prisoner—an attractive man in his late forties who I somehow assumed was in for some minor infraction (not sure what prejudices that assumption involves)—was actually a man who had been serving time for murder since he was 18 years old! This meant that everything he referred to in the discussion—his experiences, stories and examples—had all taken place in prison. Prison was essentially where he had grown up and would have to live his life. It makes you marvel at how a mind can develop in such an oppressive environment. And it makes you feel the excruciating sadness of what might have been.

Letter from a New Board Member

Dear Reader,

I was first exposed to Touchstones in the summer of 2004. Initially, I felt that it was beyond my intellectual capacity to do anything more than listen and try to understand the work that Howard was leading. I have somewhat of a technical background - Chemical Engineering degree, 20+ years in software development/technology management in consulting and corporate settings. I was shocked to discover that even I could participate, learn and contribute through the texts and methods of Touchstones. I also learned of the myriad organizations and diversity of people that have already benefited from Touchstones. I was eager to find a way to continue my participation and help expand the reach of this unique organization.

I was honored to join the Board in December of 2009. During my first Board meeting, we saw Touchstones in action with 3rd graders at the Walter P. Carter Elementary and Middle School, where the elementary grades are using Touchpebbles. And we participated in a session with inmates at the Maryland Correctional Institution at Jessup, where Touchstones has run a weekly pro-

gram with prisoners for more than a decade. What struck me was the effectiveness of this discussion method with two groups of people that could not have been more different. I was hopeful watching the students and optimistic about positively affecting their education and future. I was humbled by the inmates; their sheer interest and intelligence channeled through Touchstones gives them a freedom in thought that they cannot physically experience.

Lastly, I was given the opportunity to meet with Touchstones volunteers - it brought everything together for me. Our programs benefit the volunteers as much as the participants. What a glorious group of individuals! I am completely excited to be part of the Touchstones community and look forward to my personal involvement (and personal growth!).

Alpa Patel

Hang Tough with Touchstones

by Dennis Gray

The scene was a neighborhood elementary school in Baltimore city, and the students came chiefly from low income families living nearby in public housing. About half of the two dozen fifth graders had encountered Touchstones last school year in grade four; the other half—and the teacher—were rookies.

On cue from the teacher, the students moved quickly and quietly to form a Touchstones discussion circle of their desks and chairs. There was almost no side chatter, but the boys and girls smiled at our small party of visitors. The discussion began with the teacher's reading aloud the biblical Old Testament of King Solomon's adjudication of a dispute between two women who recently had given birth—one a healthy infant, the other still-born. Both mothers plead their claim for custody of the one living baby. How shall this heart-wrenching conflict be resolved?



The teacher's opening question, which she posed as an either-or/yes-no query, elicited a ringing chorus of "NOOOO." The teacher seemed not to recognize that the children's apparent unanimity presented the group with

an opportunity to explore whether the single common "no" masked rather divergent lines of thought or what conflicting reasoning might even support "yes" as a defensible response. More experience, I suspect, will lead this teacher to invent challenging and flexible responses to the unexpected viewpoints that students often announce.

The teacher somewhat nervously hurried the conversation along, using a stop watch and clicker to progress from one step of her lesson plan to the next. The rigid lockstep sometimes seemed to cut off discussion arbitrarily just when good thinking was emerging. This might have been a necessary trade off, especially for a teacher and students who were new to Touchstones discussion.

What was clear to my eyes and ears was that the teacher did grasp the significance of Touchstones' valuable departure from a teacher-centered mode of teacher talk and parrot-like recitation by students. The fifth graders too welcomed the chance to think out loud, to disagree civilly, to construct new perspectives, and to value what their classmates might have to contribute.

Equally clear was the need for continued, frequent practice in Touchstones discussions to cultivate the habits of mind, discourse, and deportment that come with steady progress. Good discussion does not just happen. No child comes to school equipped with a Touchstones gene. Only skillful coaching and dedicated practice over time accomplish the job. Never mind the demographics of the students. All children, just as all adults, can learn Touchstones. When the culture of schooling causes everyone to use her or his mind well, perhaps it will even raise those test scores! Hang tough with Touchstones.

Looking Forward: 2010 and Beyond

by Ralph Stengren

Conflict, whether on the playground or the battleground, is practically the human condition. When the dust settles and there are winners and losers, there is not necessarily a common agreement or understanding. I envision a world in which an approach to dialog and conflict resolution follows the model practiced by the Touchstones Discussion Project. In a Touchstones setting, participants center their interaction with others around a series of well-chosen texts – the touchstones – that, with process evaluation and greater individual responsibility and accountability for the group, serve over time to shape the group into a cohesive, cooperating whole.

Touchstones, as an organization and an approach to dialogue and leadership, is not the magic solution to conflict. However, I believe that it does promote collaboration by means of its unique approach to group dynamics. In schools, prisons and executive suites, Touchstones programs can be and are tailored to goals of the group. And in the future, Touchstones Discussion Project can and will build on its remarkable success to assist these groups and others in addressing the underlying assumptions and habits that thwart efforts to resolve conflict, and to grow together as collaborative leaders.

Reflection

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The most recent volunteer event hosted by Touchstones Discussion Project was held at the St. John's College Boat House in December. It was both festive and stirring. It was festive thanks to the Touchstones staff, who planned and executed a lovely party which served to thank and connect Touchstones volunteers, benefactors, and other affiliates who do good works here in our community as well as in other parts of the globe and also to honor the organization's volunteers of the year, Jim and Dotty Guyot, for their work bringing Touchstones to Myanmar.

It was stirring to see so many people who extend Touchstones' reach and also to know that there are so many more people involved with Touchstones who could not be present—both free and somehow incarcerated. I was enthused by the number of people working with Touchstones programs, sometimes in difficult situations (prisons, inner city schools, Third World countries) and by the way new connections to each other were discovered and extended. I was touched to see members of the Annapolis Seniors group present and to remember my own time spent in a Touchstones group with them. All over the room at this gathering there were conversations happening that Touchstones sparked.

Michelle Sanderson



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