

# VOICES

Celebrating Twenty-Five Years of Excellence in Education

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## Charting Your Course

*Cynthia Barry is the librarian and communications director at St. Martin's in the Field Day School in Severna Park, MD.*

Communication changes the world. In classrooms, in families, in the workplace, in politics, in the courtroom—conversations between people open new pathways. The skills students learn in discussion will be with them all their lives. The skills we associate with discussion—reading carefully, listening closely, speaking cogently, and maintaining civility—shape us as self-aware, self-governing, self-inspiring, and self-supporting adults.

Now beginning my sixth year of leading Touchstones Discussions for middle school students, I have found that students, parents, teachers, and school administrators recognize that the Touchstones program helps our students become strong and virtuous lovers of wisdom—in modern vernacular, lifelong learners. How does this happen?

I let individuals know how they are doing, for in discussion we learn to see ourselves as others see us. I tell quiet students that I am looking forward to hearing their thoughts. I avoid evaluative comments during the discussion, but find a few private moments before or after class to give generous, specific feedback. Did a student build on another student's idea? Did a student make a smooth transition through the individual, small group, and large group changes? Did a student help the group refocus by referring to the text? I praise listening behavior.

Since I conduct Touchstones Discussions as part of our school's Library curriculum, I put out books for further reading. Think of biographies, historical fiction, the author's works, collections and anthologies

as well as non-fiction related to the history, geography, or science of the essay. The Touchstones essays stoke curiosity!

I make a point of calling the students' parents. A call home saying, "Your son or daughter made a great contribution to our discussion today," brightens a parent's day and builds constructive home/school links. I called the mother of one of my students, and that student shined in subsequent discussion classes.



The investment of about 5 or 10 minutes paid off again and again as he contributed to the group's seriousness of purpose and depth of exploration.

Touchstones Discussions provide an opportunity to invite parents to participate and also to include guests from other schools and local colleges. Because we all encounter the text together, Touchstones is a perfect forum. Like a home team raising its game, students show their abilities and courtesy when there is a guest. We had a parent-participant for a 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading on the Life of Lysurgus from the account in

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Plutarch's *Lives*. Lycurgus, the lawgiver of Sparta, forbade travel abroad or visits. The students noticed that, unlike ancient Sparta, we welcomed visitors.

Teachers of core subjects enjoy Touchstones as part of a school's curricula because discussion skills carry over into the classroom. On occasion, I juxtapose readings to coincide with classroom content. For instance, in conjunction with units on colonial and early America, we might read from the Federalist Papers, or the Bill of Rights, or the writings of Thomas Jefferson or Alexis de Tocqueville.

We converse because it's pleasurable. It's exciting to exchange ideas, understand another's viewpoint, persuade someone to see things differently. In discussion, we are not simply decoders of information. We connect. It's pleasing to connect with other people.

But it is not just for future success or passing pleasure that we converse. In engaging with one another

through discussion, we reduce the penumbra of un-evaluated information. Through considered speech and critical inquiry, students—and teachers—seek to internalize knowledge.

The best magic happens when a student applies the Touchstones Discussions treatment to his or her own interest. After we read *On Nature*, in which the author Lucretius imagines a man throwing a spear at the edge of the universe, a 6<sup>th</sup>-grade student brought in a DVD about the universe and the view of space that the Hubble Telescope has provided. We then had a class in which he posed his own opening questions.

Touchstones Discussions encourage students to have confidence in their own interests. Reading closely, posing questions, probing an idea—these are the spearheads of curiosity that carry us to the edge of our own worlds of knowledge and, then, beyond.

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## Letter from a Touchstones Volunteer

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*Dear Touchstones Friends,*

For seven weeks I sat in community with about twelve men in Maryland Correctional Institute-Jessup (MCI-J), a medium security prison, discussing...

Each week it became more difficult to reconcile what these men had done to be incarcerated and who I was actually sitting with in the small classroom in the MCI-J school building.

A friend who spent 35 years as a Maryland State Trooper and part of that time investigating adverse situations inside Maryland State prisons called me one day. His purpose was to caution me about the character of these men. After a 30-minute monologue about the horrors that occur inside these facilities, I asked him how he, or any other prison authority, accounts for the goodness in each person. He came up speechless.

In prison, each man offered great insight based on the reading, as well as significant contributions from his personal history. Snippets about an alcoholic parent, physical abuse in the home, and other problems commonly associated with abject poverty were offered cautiously. These offerings touched me deeply, making me think all the more about the justice issues that face me, and indeed all Americans, right here near my own home.

I gained amazing insight into myself, thinking about how selfish I felt about how much I was growing through my interaction with these men. I learned about my own hot buttons. I saw great goodness in each man as he grappled with the issues, both on the surface and buried

deep inside the readings. There was goodness in each man who was participating and searching for the answers to his own predicament. There was goodness in each community volunteer who came to listen, share and grow.

This is an interfaith group, most likely including agnostics and atheists, which meets and allows for the grappling of difficult issues. Given the diverse religious understandings of this group, I was humbled when our conversations about God were searching and respectful.

I am reminded of Galatians 5:22-23: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.

We can pray for such blessings; and we can rejoice when we find them even in the most unlikely situations. It may be difficult to imagine such an environment inside a state prison facility, but this was my experience. I am thankful that I have grown to know these men in such a setting that allowed for relationships to be nurtured so that I could see them as they are and not just know them by the acts they have done.

- *Michelle Sanderson*

*This spring, Michelle Sanderson completed her "Internship in the World" with Touchstones as part of her discernment process with the Episcopal Church. During that time, Michelle also created a new Touchstones Prison Program volunteer orientation program.*

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# Reflections

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Earlier this year, *Voices* ran an article about the terrific work the UpperShore Workforce Investment Board does providing job training for 14-17 years olds on Maryland's Eastern shore. This summer, Touchstones was a daily part of the six week program that employed 120 youth and more than 20 crew chiefs. Here is what some participants had to say about their Touchstones experience.

"With Touchstones, I learned that I'm a good listener and other people's opinions are just as important as mine." (J.Waters)

"Touchstones helped me learn to take responsibility for my own actions." (D. Emory)

"I learned how valuable my opinions are to others." (S. Woolford)

"Touchstones discussions are meaningful because many of the kids have problems but have seen that talking with others and dealing with matters head-on is helpful in our different challenges of life. Touchstones is outstanding." (T. Corsey, Crew Chief)

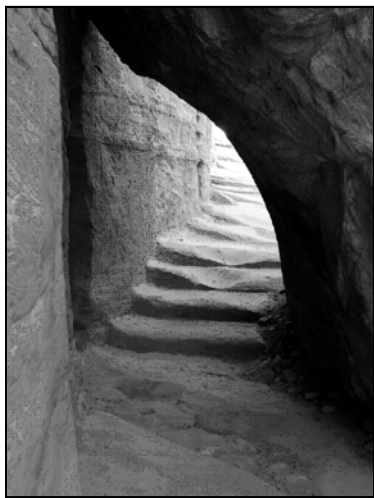
"I really enjoyed hearing what each member had to say in the discussions. Certain topics excited some more than others, but overall, I learned about them, their personalities, their morals/values and their sense of humor!" (Anon., Crew Chief)

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## Looking Forward: Expansion in Jordan

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Every once in a rare while, people with common purposes cross paths and their collective efforts change the world. Such has been the case for Touchstones with long-time volunteer Dr. Graham Leonard. Graham, who was honored as Touchstones' volunteer of the year in 2007, first learned of Touchstones when he attended St. John's College Graduate Institute. Not long after finding his way around campus, he met Touchstones co-founder Howard Zeiderman, who, in addition to leading Touchstones into the world, also teaches at the college. Graham explained his dream of reviving dialogue in the Middle East and the steps he had already taken on the West Bank and Gaza. While living and teaching there from 1950 to 1996, Leonard started Arabic discussions with teachers based on Arabic texts and modeled on discussions that were common during the Abbasid Dynasty (750 CE—1258 CE).



*A Well-worn Staircase at Petra, Jordan*

Since 1996, Dr. Leonard and Touchstones have collaborated to introduce the Touchstones method in Arabic to the Middle East. In Jordan, where the Ministry of Education, (MOE), has seized on *MaHakkaat* (Touchstones in Arabic) as an integral part of their education reform, the program serves as a pilot for other Arabic areas. Thanks in part to generous funding from The Institute for Intercultural Studies, The Appleby Foundation, the Sheik M. A. Shami Foundation for Human Services, and private donors, Touchstones will work with Jordanian educators to more than double the number of students engaged in Touchstones discussions this academic year. Touchstones will be used by 200,000 students in grades six through ten as part of the Arabic curriculum.

Implementing or reviving a lost pedagogy for thousands of teachers poses serious but not insurmountable challenges. To reinforce initial training, this year MOE provides all teachers one hour per week release time to develop mastery of the Touchstones method through peer teaching groups and experiential learning—running discussions and evaluating each of them together.

Although the Touchstones method arises from the ancient Socratic approach—as did the Abbasid discussions—Touchstones concentrates on discussion process as well as content. For Touchstones to succeed, the myriad assumptions, habits, and beliefs that underlie our understanding of knowledge and constructs must first be examined. Through structured participant feedback, the approach goes beyond the Socratic method and fosters inclusive and responsive collaborative engagement. People learn to think fluidly and creatively, simultaneously serving as leaders and participants. Each person in the discussion assumes responsibility for what the group achieves together.

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This October, Touchstones Director of School Programs, Amman. Touchstones and Dr. Leonard are excited about Ryan Phillips, and Dr. Leonard will run a series of Touchstones workshops for educators from the Jordanian MOE, teachers, and curricula supervisors, as well as for civic leaders and non-governmental organizations in the enhanced focus that this work brings to Touchstones in the region, and we look forward to updating you throughout the year.

## How You Make a Difference

In the past 25 years, we've seen over and over that people surprise their teachers, friends, parents, the staff here at Touchstones, and perhaps especially themselves when they enter the Touchstones seminar environment and discover new ways of thinking and being with others. However, no group's exploration and collaboration holds more potential than that of the autistic adults at Richmond House—adults imprisoned inside themselves. Wes Haddaway, the Executive Director of Richmond House, knows the Touchstones project firsthand from when he used it with senior citizens in Bowie, MD. Now from Richmond, he has asked us to join him in answering a hopeful question: might high-functioning autistic adults and adults with Asperger's Syndrome participate in Touchstones and build community together through the activity of discussion?

This work is just starting. Though every group faces similar barriers, each person and each group bring their particular skills and weaknesses to the program. Touchstones makes room for those very skills to create new individual and collective strengths. So we ask ourselves and others and you, please share your thoughts and experiences with us as we look to find ways for all people to examine themselves and explore fundamental human issues together.



Howard Zeiderman, President

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