



MARYLAND'S BUSINESS & LEGAL NEWS SINCE 1888

The stories of their lives

With Touchstones' Great Books program, even lifers can be free thinkers

BY NANCY KERCHEVAL

Special to The Daily Record

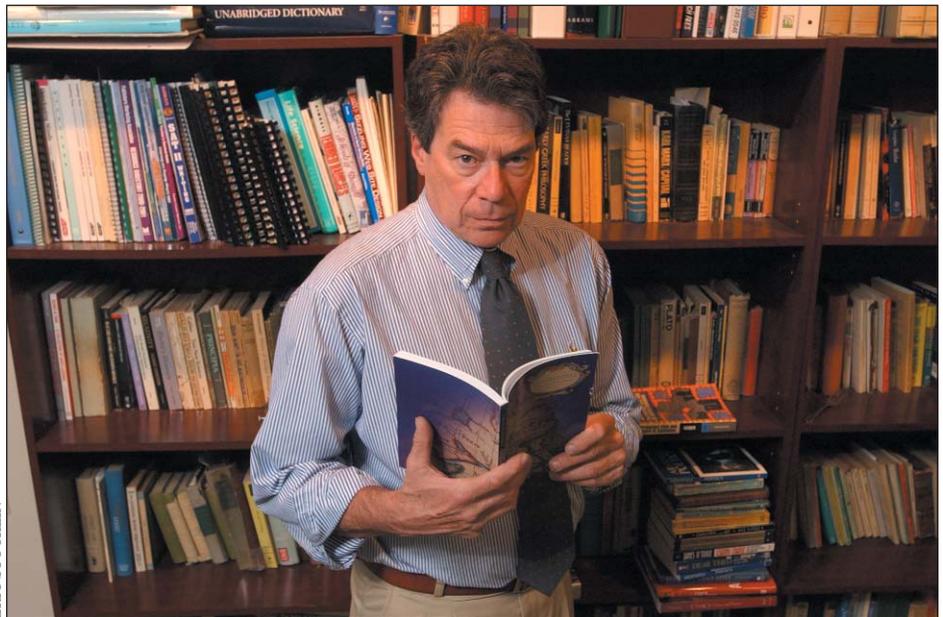
Revenge is a sort of savage justice. The more people try to take revenge, the more the law should punish them. When a man commits a crime, he breaks the law. But when the injured person takes revenge, the person destroys law itself. In taking revenge, a person does indeed get even with his enemy, but when one refuses to take revenge, he shows that he is better than his enemy. King Solomon, I am sure, said it is glorious for a person to forget an injury.

What is certain about planning to get even is that one's own wounds remain open. If one didn't spend one's time trying to take revenge, those injuries would heal and be forgotten. ... People who take revenge live the life of witches. They cause trouble to others and come to a bad end.

So says Sir Francis Bacon in a modern translation of his 17th-century essay, "Of Revenge." These passages set up a discussion of the Great Books for a group of 10 with Howard Zeiderman, president and co-founder of **Touchstones**, as the leader.

Sitting with him in a guarded common area are nine lifers at the **Maryland House of Correction** in Jessup.

It was a decade ago when these nine men invited Zeiderman, a senior faculty member at **St. John's College** where the Great Books cement the four-year curriculum, to venture inside the walls and discuss the creation of a Touchstones program.



ERIC STOCKLIN

The Koran, the Bible, Plato, Locke, Aristotle and Darwin — these are just a few sources used by Touchstones' Great Books program as adapted for the incarcerated. 'Different groups have peculiar issues,' said Touchstones president and co-founder Howard Zeiderman, above. 'In prison, it's a complete absence of control over their environment. It requires thinking through how to tailor the program to assist those people.'

"The men talked about what roles such a program could play in the prison," Zeiderman said. "These were all lifers, men who had been there for many, many years. They thought that it might change their relationships with the younger men by getting them in groups where they could give the younger men better advice.

"And they thought if they got to know one another better, it might change the prison environment — humanize the environment. They felt that it would change the environment at a very personal level so they and other men in these situations

would recognize they could think about things that were very serious and they had a lot to say to others and even to themselves, and that they would gain a type of self-respect they couldn't get in the environment."

The Touchstones program evolved after peer tutoring programs of the 1980s proved successful despite initial concerns about inmates teaching inmates.

"At first they resisted because there was a fear of giving certain inmates power over others," Zeiderman said, "but they did it and it was very success-

ful and is now in many, many states.”

Touchstones touches the inmates at **Maryland Correctional Institute** and the **Maryland Correctional Training Center** in Hagerstown as well as the Maryland House of Correction in Jessup.

“Of Revenge” often is used to train the inmates to lead a discussion group. “Everyone is an expert on getting even, but you just don’t want to hear stories about how they got even and how they felt. You want them to think about getting even.”

“Using a short excerpt from Francis Bacon’s essay gives the participants a distance from their own experience in order to really consider what goes on when they seek revenge.”

Every inmate participant, whether he is literate or not, can bring his own skills to “a genuine discussion,” Zeiderman said. “In the prison situation, men who can’t read have been surviving by their ears. They are terrific listeners. People who are more literate have difficulty with this program because their whole reward structure is different.

“Touchstones in prison is a non-prepared program,” he said. “There is no preparation required because we are dealing with all levels of literacy. All readings are unfamiliar. We want to use readings to enable participants to talk about the topics. It’s a funny blend of an activity that has to do with the text and the generalized experience of the participants.”

On their own

After that first invitation a decade ago, Zeiderman returned to the prison once a week for two years. After each videotaped discussion, the group spent 45 minutes analyzing what had happened.

He remembers one of the first discussion groups he turned over to the inmates. The selection, written by a freed slave, dealt with the effect of owning slaves on the slave owner.

Zeiderman thought the subject was too volatile for the racially mixed group of lifers, but he wasn’t the leader, so he stepped back.

“This discussion was getting really intense,” he said. “All the discipline I thought I had developed was vanishing. I was holding my breath.”

As the 60-minute discussion continued, some inmates walked out and then returned. “I was not certain what was going on,” Zeiderman said.

Then the leader abruptly stopped the conversation and said it was time to evaluate the discussion. Everyone calmed down and they analyzed their discussion for the next 25 minutes.

Zeiderman’s confidence in the program was restored.

Eventually, however, the program came to an end. For more than two years he had battled the logistical problems of getting the group together in a common room. At that time, he was going through the corrections department as a volunteer.

Six months later, while he was sitting in the coffee shop with St. John’s College’s director of admissions, he learned a prison inmate had applied for acceptance to the Annapolis college. Zeiderman, encouraged by the inmate’s interest, sent him information about the Touchstones program.

He heard nothing for three months, but then discovered the inmates at the Maryland Correctional Institute at Jessup were conducting the program on their own.

“I wasn’t working in a prison then and I wanted to get back in,” he said.

* * *

Since the first discussion groups at the House of Correction, the number of participants has doubled to about 20, including seven or eight outsiders and 13 inmates.

The civilians who join Zeiderman are a “who’s who” of mid-Atlantic elite — Mark Lindley, who retired after making his fortune with AOL; Ken Bacon, former assistant secretary of the defense and Pentagon spokesman; Ken Brody, formerly of Goldman Sachs and head of the Export-Import Bank; former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Lawrence H. Summers; Gemstar Group President William Nitze, son of the late Paul Nitze, who was chief architect of the U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union for 40 years; Cameron LaClair, a member of the board of the Phillips Collection; Steve Kurtz, former president of the prestigious Phillips Exeter Academy; and Irene Wurtzel, the wife of Circuit City mogul Alan L. Wurtzel.

“Everybody is on the same level — these inmates and highly successful people,” Zeiderman said.

His connections with many of these volunteers started when he was called upon by Brody, then with Goldman Sachs, to conduct a discussion group every Sunday from September to May at the Harvard Club in New York. Over an eight-year period, the group met about 30 times to discuss the Great Books.

When Brody moved to Washington and the trip to New York became an inconvenience, he asked Zeiderman to establish a similar discussion group in the nation’s capital. Now in its eighth year, it meets every other week in a Georgetown home. It is from this group that he has plucked many of his volunteers.

Transformations

Lindley, a classmate of Zeiderman’s at St. John’s, was intrigued by the program when he joined the discussion group more than three years ago.

“I became completely excited when I walked into the prison with Howard because of what I saw. I learn a great deal from the men. We’re really all learning from one another and that’s where we see changes in people,” Lindley said. Now he and Zeiderman are in several prisons, training inmates to run the discussion groups. They are attempting to take the program system-wide.

“We see someone come in who is a blustering, frustrated, angry young person who six months later is a calm, reflective person. You can’t imagine you were part of this transition and change — which is why I got deeply involved in the activity, because I wanted to see what we were doing that is having this impact.”

At first, Lindley would visit the prison three or four times a week, leading groups and observing discussions “to get enough data points to become confident there was really something going on.”

He discovered that just as infants and toddlers try to mimic the adults around them in learning to walk and talk, so do the inmates realize by listening to others that they, too, have something intelligent to contribute to the group.

“When we are babies, we fall down a couple of times and then we get it,” he said. “In the prison school where I work, the same kind of process is going on. They’re listening to one another. They see someone who is not that different from themselves who is able to grasp an idea and say something intelligent about it, so maybe now I am willing to try that. After fumbling a few times they discover they have something to say and they discover people are listening to them.

“The whole process — and here the language gets awfully mystical — a transformation occurs and they discover they, too, are human beings. And once they make that connection, then anything is possible. I’ve seen astonishing transformations and some people where it has had no effect at all. It’s up to the individual whether they want to try or not. For someone so into their self-hatred and destructive behavior that they’re not interested in anything that will make a change at that point, then that doesn’t,” Lindley said.

As Lindley and his volunteers join the inmates on the second and fourth Thursdays of the month, all participants sit in a circle with a teacher, who is there only to help, not dictate the pace or direction of

the discussion. There is no hand-raising. No preparation. The ground rules: read the text carefully; listen to what others say and don't interrupt; speak clearly so others can understand; give others respect.

"It's like an Alcoholic Anonymous where everyone uses their first name and no one has a history," Lindley said. "We don't ask the inmates 'what are you in for' and we don't talk too much about our professional lives."

'True freedom'

Since no one knows the subject of the text, Lindley said there have been times he has questioned the subject matter.

"Sometimes the selections strike me as wacky and I wonder why they picked that. Three months ago we read the first couple of Amendments to the United States Constitution dealing with the freedom of religion and the right to bear arms and I looked at this and said, 'Huh?' But we had a wonderful discussion."

Earlier this month, the discussion centered on true freedom in an essay by an ancient philosopher. One of the inmates offered that he had never been so free as he was in prison. "All the things that distracted me and ruined my life, I haven't been able to do," he told the group, according to Lindley. "I've had to focus on what is important. I have discovered I can actually be a free person."

Lindley said he was "astonished" to listen to man say prison was good for him. "But these are the things that people discover about themselves."

Not long ago, the discussion centered around the work of feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Unbeknownst to the members, one of the inmates had just had a verbal argument with a female teacher at the prison. Lindley remembered the inmate came into the discussion group enraged.

"I looked at the reading, which I had selected, and thought, 'Oh, my God,'" he said.

During the first 30 minutes, the other men in the group were intrigued as they gathered an understanding of the issues

facing women. Then finally, the angry inmate calmed down and offered, "Wow, maybe I did something to set her off."

"You can't tell what the particulars of a given day's diet in the mess hall is going to bring about or what is going to have happened to someone that is going to lead the person to have a particularly good or bad day that often enriches the discussion," Lindley said.

Using an Iroquois tale, "Hiawatha Sees Himself," Zeiderman offers the inmates an insight into what they might be experiencing. The story goes that Hiawatha, a cannibal, is cooking his victim when the smoke curling out of the chimney unveils a spirit that looks down. The cannibal sees the serene and magnificent face in the cooking water and thinks it is his own. "How can someone with this face so serene and so wise do what I do?" he asks.

He meets the spirit and says he's miserable. The spirit explains he feels the way he does because his mind has not been harmonized with his old memories.

"This whole subject — it was very poignant in prison to hear these people talk about how they are different now and live with their memories plus there was the outside group that had the same feelings," Zeiderman said.

* * *

Words from the Koran; texts from Plato, Locke, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Darwin; passages from the Bible. These readings are incorporated into the prison program in an effort to teach the prisoners to listen to each other; to accept the differences among themselves.

"So much in a discussion has to do with who you think holds power or has the right to speak as an expert on the subject," Zeiderman said.

But discussions using the Touchstones rules open up opportunities for everyone in a group.

"Everyone is facing the same issues, but certain groups are more concerned with certain issues than others. Discussions have to do with the redistribution of power;

whatever culture — whether it be a government agency, a prison or a school, you're thinking about who has the power. It might be someone stronger or smarter or the boss," Zeiderman said.

"Different groups have peculiar issues," he said. "In prison, it's a complete absence of control over their environment. It requires thinking through how to tailor the program to assist those people."

But Lindley was adamant in the belief that the leader has to have the self-confidence to believe in the success of the program.

"If you have an inmate who may not be very well educated but has enough sense of self that he believes the group is going to have a good discussion, it will usually have a good discussion, while a teacher with a Master's degree whose self-confidence isn't very great and thinks he can't do this, he probably won't have a very good discussion."

Touchstones, Zeiderman said, has taught the inmates to work together as a team, respect people from other backgrounds, solve problems and discover what they have to offer. "All these skills are useful as they come out in a work environment. They learn to be more articulate about what their needs are. It essentially teaches them to give back to society."

In addition, it changes the society in the prison. "People have said because they have been able to explain issues they have in prison, they don't have as many infractions and they get along with other people in the prison who come from different groups or gangs," Zeiderman said.

Most of the results are anecdotal, but Zeiderman said studies have shown education has a positive effect on inmates who are susceptible to recidivism.

"It teaches them a kind of skill, not a particular craft, but teaches them to work with people and how to think for themselves, how to teach themselves," Zeiderman said. "So they really learn to think on their feet."

*Reprinted with permission of
The Daily Record Co. ©2004*