

# HOBBS IN PRISON

*Mark Lindley (A67) Brings Great Books to Prisoners*

BY ROSEMARY HARTY

*“Attention all visitors: As a part of the routine search that must be conducted before you are allowed to enter the institution, you will be required to open your mouth. Those who refuse shall be denied entry.”*

**R**ules and regulations greet every visitor to the Maryland Correctional Institution-Jessup. Don't move through a moving door until it has stopped moving. No double visits on holiday weekends. If asked, open your mouth for inspection.

Mark Lindley (A67) pulls out his driver's license and a Department of Corrections volunteer I.D. and tries to usher a group of volunteers into the regular Wednesday morning session of Touchstones, an Annapolis-based project based on reading and discussing passages from great books. A few weeks before, Lindley had forgotten his license and was turned away. Today one of his visitors isn't on "the list" from the principal of the prison school. Speaking patiently and diplomatically to the guard behind the glass, he asks that the principal be called for permission.

"Every couple of weeks, there's a new procedure and an old procedure goes by the wayside," Lindley comments as his group waits by a row of lockers. Several minutes go by as a guard calls the prison school to check if the unlisted visitor can enter. Several more minutes go by until the guard who called decides to tell the guard behind the glass that the visitor has been approved.

Lindley shows only gratitude as he waits for his turn through the metal detector, then leads his group into the prison yard and to the building that houses the prison school. About a dozen chairs have been set in a circle. Dion, a slim, bespectacled

young man in dreadlocks, has placed a copy of the Touchstones text—a selection of short readings culled from many of the books of the St. John's Program—on each chair.

The reading is a two-page passage from *Leviathan*, rendered into simpler prose and shorter sentences, but keeping Hobbes' major ideas intact. Participants—initially five inmates and the Touchstones group—are reminded of the rules for discussion and directed to the reading. Dion announces the opening question, a rather broad one: "What is the nature of man?"

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In the next 45 minutes, the conversation will face long silences and diversions. More questions are generated as inmates wrestle with the philosopher's view about law, order, and chaos: Should we live our lives in fear? Is it possible for two people to compete for the same thing and not try to destroy each other?

"The nature of man," offers one of the inmates, "is to seek what makes him happy or content." In some cases, he says, it's a big car, a nice house, a good job.

Adds another inmate, a quiet man: "You can only find peace when you look at what's inside yourself, be true to yourself."

Sometimes one or two people dominate the conversation; often the participants struggle to express a thought. Some conversations have been volatile. But nearly every time, says Lindley, the discussions cross lines of race and class, education and

experience, freedom and imprisonment, to touch on questions of humanity: Is it possible to obtain peace living in our society today?

The Touchstones Discussion Project—created in 1984 by tutors Howard Zeiderman (A67), Geoffrey Comber (HAG195), and Nick Maistrellis, based in Annapolis and independent of the college—has been in Maryland prisons since 1996. Designed to help individuals of all backgrounds develop skills such as problem solving, questioning, listening, and cooperating, the project was already in schools, nursing homes, corporations, and organizations. The idea to take it to prisons came from a community college teacher in Santa Fe who attended a Touchstones workshop. After a program in the New Mexico State Penitentiary got under way, Zeiderman began working on bringing it into Maryland's prisons. His initial meeting was with nine men serving life sentences at the Maryland House of Corrections. "They had three reasons they thought Touchstones would be helpful for prisoners: It would humanize the environment; they would take themselves more seriously as individuals; and they appreciated that ideas like justice, integrity, and truth would be helpful to talk about."

The nonprofit organization had to overcome some bureaucratic roadblocks, but it's now in four prisons in the state. More than 1,000 prisoners have gone through the program, which over the years has gained credibility in the Department of Corrections. The parole board now accepts Touchstones certificates as part of an inmate's record. And Zeiderman hopes one

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MARK LINDLEY FINDS UNCOMMON WISDOM AND INSIGHT IN THE CONVERSATIONS HE SHARES WITH PRISONERS THROUGH THE TOUCHSTONES DISCUSSION PROJECT. LINDLEY IS ONE OF DOZENS OF TOUCHSTONES VOLUNTEERS IN MARYLAND PRISONS.