

Transformations: Moments of Change

**Writings from the Touchstones Prison Project
2010**

Touchstones Discussion Project

The Unknown Good

Cynthia B.

Touchstones Discussion Prison Volunteer since 2004

Can conversations based on texts about great ideas change lives? I know that a conversation I had in prison with a convict changed my life for the better. I can also say that our conversation had a ripple effect, unknown to the prisoner himself, that to this day improves the lives of others. After a summer of weekly Touchstones Discussions at the Jessup Correctional Institution, one man came up to me and said, “I wish I had Touchstones Discussions when I was growing up. This would be a great program in my daughter’s school. She’s in 6th grade at a public school in Baltimore.” It was an “ah-ha!” moment. I had not thought about Touchstones Discussions at the middle-school level, but I had seen enough to know that the skills that Touchstones engenders—listening to others, being open to differing points of view, being civil, expressing the important questions that we all have about how to live—are skills that help make us successful, self-governing adults. That fall, I began teaching Touchstones Discussions at a middle school in Maryland, and that has been my work for the past six years. I never saw that convict again. I was never able to tell him what changed as a result of his vision. I never thanked him for steering me toward employment that I find tremendously rewarding. In this case, the man convicted of a crime was the instigator of an unknown good. So, why is a Touchstones Discussion program in prison valuable? I would say because we connect through conversation. And even from within prison walls, we have connections with the world and a responsibility to build a better future for ourselves and all our children. As we navigate the challenges of life, conversations that spring from great texts can yield the most important compass bearings.

Reflection

Jeremy J.

Touchstones Prison Program Volunteer

As currently situated, a discussion at MCI-J features 4-5 volunteers and 10-20 inmates. We all sit in a circle, a selection is read aloud and then the floor is opened to discussion. There are simple ground rules to make sure that everyone feels comfortable speaking, but other than that, any topic is open.

I first walked into a prison about sixteen months ago. I put it off for quite awhile after being invited. I could see no reason to go in there. Prisoners, especially these guys, were bad guys. Even if they could be helped, why would anyone want to? And there certainly wasn't anything in it for me. What would I get out of a discussion with a group, most of whom hadn't completed the eighth grade? And there was the fear thing too. It's not supposed to be safe for nice looking young men to go into prison.

I was still very unsure the first time that I went in. I eventually accepted the invitation for other reasons, but the actual going in to a prison part of the whole deal was frightening. And then, you have to wait. You have to pass through metal detectors. You have to pass through multiple automatic doors. You have to walk across a courtyard with hundreds of men and a guard or two. It takes maybe half an hour before you sit down in a classroom, with a few other volunteers and about fifteen inmates. There are no guards present.

And then, a funny thing happened. Now, looking back, I don't remember what the topic was for that evening, but what happened was that I started actually listening and paying attention to the discussion. At first, it was just so that I could add something (I've always tried to seem impressive and silence does the opposite), but eventually, while listening, I found that the inmates actually had interesting things to say. That they could talk about a topic as well (actually better) than any outside volunteer could.

I'd never really met anyone like that before. I know criminals, but they're kids who sold drugs and were seven degrees removed from any real dealer. I've known poor people, but because of the circles I run in, they're poor people trying to pull themselves up to economic success with education and hard work. I'd never met anyone from the streets who was actually still on the streets.

It's not just a different perspective. It's the perspective of people for whom ruminating is a luxury that they can't afford. We read and discuss philosophy for fun. Their daily lives are trials with real world problems. They live by real codes that they trust implicitly in and would never break. The hardness of their lives, the fact that they have to constantly struggle, not to move forward, but to keep from moving backwards too far, means that all of their thoughts come from themselves or the life that they know. Everything that they think is a part of them in a real way that is not so for all of us.

I got through that first discussion feeling good and genuinely wanted to go again. I wanted to hear them, but more I wanted to interact. A back and forth, discussing things with them, could inform me.

And I talked. Eighteen months ago I was a quiet person. Not really by choice, but for lack of confidence. I didn't like to say anything that might be wrong. Just a defect that I'd always had.

But here, everyone was supposed to talk, nothing could be wrong, and more than either of those, everyone listened when someone talked. I never lacked for ideas, not about anything, and so I made my thoughts known. It becomes easy very quickly.

I never use to talk to strangers, not really anyway, or not unless I was three drinks in. It was just something I didn't do. Now I do it all the time. Maybe the rest of the world is worse off for that, but I feel better, and I feel even better that I was able to get that out of a prison.

Months passed. I didn't notice anything happening, but eventually, one day, I realized that the inmates liked me, in a real way. One of the aspects of volunteering there is that you speak genuinely and express your thoughts, and the inmates there liked who I was when I exposed

myself. I was brash, I was loud, I was even annoying, but I was also able to be one of them.

Maybe because I never really had much of an identity beforehand, maybe something else. It doesn't really matter now. What matters is that I came to view them as regular people, and did so when I started looking up at them instead of down at them.

And it was very cool. These are some of the hardest men in the country. They don't just accept people. I've seen dozens of other volunteers walk into that place. They are all initially met with some apprehension and suspicion, but I had gotten to the point where I was past that. Me, who had never able to impress much of anyone, had made an impression on these men.

Maybe it was only after I had gotten all of my own selfishness out of it that I was able to give something back, but I can now. I no longer go to the groups to posit my ideas and to feel better about myself. I go to help.

There's a kid who comes now who is younger than I am, born 1988. He told me that he comes because he wants to be able to do something different when he gets out. He doesn't have any marketable skills, so while he's in prison he's trying to learn as much as he can about anything. He's very quiet in the larger group, but he is clearly interested and there to participate.

I will get through to him. Not to flip any switch, or magically change anything, or magically give him a new way of thinking. Just to help him speak up, to help him so that he can go after something if he wants it. The groups aren't the real world, but they are a nice training ground for it, a place to practice as well as to learn.

They like to talk about their lives. Whenever I have asked them what kind of texts they want to do it's always that, more relatable, more current, more stuff that they know. In a way they will always be talking about their lives. They don't have vast reservoirs of knowledge to draw on, some of them can't even read. They have themselves, though, which

is all anyone really has. They have as much of themselves as anyone does.

I went in to prison scared, and seeking only to help myself. And I got that. But I also got something much more, the desire to help others.

Reflection

Anna B.

Touchstones Volunteer

The Touchstones prison program is essential both for the prisoners and for the community at large. Through this program, prisoners learn to understand the greater consequences of their actions, to think deeply about life in all its complexity and to become thoughtful leaders. This is a life-changing experience for them and for their loved ones. It empowers them to be better parents, siblings, or spouses. Without the opportunity for self-improvement we maintain a status quo of ongoing prison violence and negative role models that result in the continuation of a vicious cycle.

Reflection

Mel B.

Touchstones Prison Program Volunteer

As a small business owner, I had the resources to offer entry level jobs for newly released prisoners. This opportunity allowed the men a positive entry back into society.

When, as a St. John's graduate student, I heard of the Touchstones program, I was intrigued with the opportunity to interact with inmates prior to their release. Would I find male prisoners wondering who or what we were? Would I get a glimpse of the inner personality that motivated someone, upon release, to take the low paying job I had to offer as a business owner.

After my first visit I felt like Fagin from Oliver, "I had to think again."

These men I met with were well read; they thought seriously, and spoke constructively, on the selected material. What circumstances led them to their present situation, I will never know? Does my presence, my interaction, make a difference? Who knows? I am personally uplifted from my involvement as it gives me different perspectives on the readings. One that can be disturbing as well as rewarding.

These Touchstones discussions prompt us to let go of unexamined assumptions, and allow insight into what may be important in one's behavior. If time allows, we do engage in an evaluation of the session from all participants. Allowing that I might be hearing what they want me to hear, their feedback suggests that Touchstones has a meaningful influence on the interests and attitudes of the prisoners.

My First Trip to Prison

Giuliana D.

Touchstones Prison Program Participant

I almost didn't go. I wanted the time to get organized for the Orlando conference. But, Adam inspired me with his promise to be doing late night laundry and packing, and it was an opportunity to think about evaluation, AND I have been so curious...

I am so glad, beyond glad—ecstatic—that I went. Everything I want to say, every feeling and word is loaded with this overwhelming energy-- excitement, desire, pain, and frustration—a feeling that makes me want to scream against the sentences and cells that these men live with, and scream, shout, beg for their humanity—the kindness, thoughtfulness, and passion they showed and shared with each other, with me. I want them to be treated and to live as the humans that their thoughts show them to be—thoughts more human, more real, packed with more seriousness and sincerity than the language used by those of us who are actually living free lives. I cannot imagine talking about life, men, honor, emotion, with such sincerity, without the chance to live the life being talked about—unable to pursue the honorable dreams of the past, unable to share these words with people you love... not even treated like a man—yet able to talk about a man, men, a life, our lives... I so admire them for engaging in these conversations, and I admire the clarity with which some of them express their ideas, and again, their sincerity! I was blown away by the whole experience.

If nothing else, I want you to hear that I am so thankful and excited to be part of an organization that allows people to be human and to share their goodness, their light—a light* so often hidden out of fear or distorted under bad circumstances and bad decisions. I may be a terrible/wonderful idealist, I may be naive and young, and I know I'm going to Hell (that's been confirmed time and again in this semester's theology), but this experience affirmed my belief in goodness, (if I have a 'belief' it would be in humanity's/the world's love, beauty, and goodness—each term uncertainly defined by me) and that everyone has light within them to share. And I think Touchstones gives these men

the chance to do that, sincerely, and in a setting in which they can see their own ability and the abilities of others. It may seem that I am exaggerating, and as the feelings are fresh, they are more extreme than they will be tomorrow morning. I don't know...

I'm also thankful for the reminder to consider my life, this world and everyone in it as valuable—every idea and conversation, every interaction and experience can be stimulating—every person has so much to offer. And I love that Touchstones helps people access, activate, and share their excellence, goodness, beauty. I think it enriches humanity by helping us all see who we are as individuals and who we are when interconnected, as the group, or humankind—all people with minds and lives sharing this time and space—and to see how we can connect as minds and people, and bring this 'light' this positive humanity out with and through one another. This kind of interaction, engagement if you will, can be so powerful. I think that I caught a glimpse today that will help energize me to work harder, with more passion, and a closer connection to why I do what I do-- why I think Touchstones is so important.

**When I use "light" I am thinking of this quote by Nelson Mandela (or Marianne Williamson):*

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

Ok. I'm done. Time for packing and sleeping.

First Time “Inside”

Michelle S.

Touchstones Prison Program Participant

Teasing a simple reflection about any one part of my first time inside the prison environment has proved challenging. Here is a summary of the event, parsing the visit into discernable segments:

- ✓ Touchstone volunteer pre- and post-session gathering time;
- ✓ Procedural events, including check in, check out, and security with interaction with guards and prison staff; and
- ✓ Class time with the inmates and volunteers, including gathering time, introductions, initial reading of our text, small group discussion, large group discussion and goodbyes.

I perceived significant periods of procedural responsibilities in which I felt out of control and that at any moment someone could make a decision on my behalf which would affect my position. I didn't feel that I had control over myself or my situation at all, probably as a result of my initial encounter with a guard with a “tough” disposition. And I wonder, if I felt like this as a visitor, how do the residents in this environment feel?

However, the anxiety I initially experienced left me once the Touchstones discussion started. The more than 15 men had all been regular participants with Touchstones and knew what to do, easily adopting the four new volunteers into their learning community.

There are a few lines from one piece of the orientation papers (*Community Participant Guidelines*) that echo in my ears as I reflect on my first time in a Touchstones prison program:

“The distinction between givers and receivers falls apart... in the end all of the participants meet each other as human beings working together to think through difficult questions without clear answers.”

I was taken as much by the willingness and desire of the Touchstones' participants to not only listen but also to make an effort to hear each other as I was by the hardness of the first guard I encountered. And I wonder, wouldn't the entire prison system benefit from the same level of exposure to these texts and from the quality of discussion.

What did I gain from the experience? I was offered a peak at the hearts and minds of individuals convicted of crimes, and I experienced people interested in not just academic stimulation but also in connection, experience and reason. There seemed to be a true desire among the participants to understand the topic, which in this instance was prejudice (pre-judgment), offered through an excerpt of Frankenstein by Mary Shelley. Most of the participants communicated an understanding of the issue. Nevertheless, I wonder how any of us, free or imprisoned, would take the discussion back into our daily lives and apply it.

There is goodness on the "inside" each time one man works to make sense of the world and each time one man tries to understand another.

God is there among the Christians, Buddhists, Muslims and those studying Islam, agnostics, and atheists listening to the conversations and participating in their community. There is goodness in the resident prison community.

It seems that there could be so many relevant scriptural verses to choose from in which to view experience through. Luke 6:37 stands out to me:

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

In this choice of scripture it is forgiveness that I am thinking of most. In this Touchstone experience I was given the opportunity to practice forgiveness – not for a wrong done to me but rather for a wrong done in society. An inmate has already been judged for a wrong committed, and they will be judged again. My job is to forgive, to look away from a

wrong done and to look toward a human connection - a way to wholeness.

For the Record

Elliot A.

Touchstones Prison Volunteer

There is so much I could say about the privilege of being a volunteer and thereby student in and of the Touchstones Discussion Prison Project but there came indeed “that” defining moment. It came during a discussion of the revered Lincoln’s beautifully crafted Gettysburg Address. There had been much discussion, a moment of silence, and then an inmate said, “It’s a recruiting poster.” I have always thought that way about standard war memorials but my heart ***needed*** that perspective about something I had otherwise been able to hold sacred. Its writing remains rich, gorgeous, elegant but its message is forever altered in my soul.

Thoughts on Meeting Prisoners' Families

Jessica B.

Touchstones Prison Program participant

As a visitor and participant in the weekly discussion groups that Touchstones holds with inmates at MCI-J, I meet men who are on a journey. We've come to discussion to re-examine our beliefs and to expand our freedom to act in the world; we each do it because we sense that we can be more than what we are now. The discipline of holding focus on a single text permits a rare intellectual and emotional intimacy. The exchanges born of this environment are the vehicle for the changes we wish to make in ourselves. In order to make that connection, we shed part of our context – we set aside the roles of inmate and visitor, privileged or poor. Rather than reflect on our experiences, we choose to reflect through our experiences on ourselves. It is men and women in distillation who participate in discussion.

All the same, we tell each other stories. When an inmate tells a story in discussion, it usually falls into one of two categories – either it illustrates the technique of survival in prison or it is the story of how that inmate came to prison. Rarely is the latter an account of their crime, more often it is a snapshot of the life that developed into their crime. It is in these stories, if at all, that I've met these men in their context as citizens – in their pasts that they are putting away and in their intentions for their futures. Each story they tell is of a moral and personal struggle – in the story, the inmate is very much alone.

Last Saturday I went to an MCIJ event called Reading Unites Families (RUF). The prison invited in the inmates' children and their caretakers for a structured event meant to encourage them to connect with their kids around books. When I arrived, the inmates were setting up for the event. Our friend Dave (?) from discussion was wearing a Styrofoam toy crown above his prison blues, and he gave me the tour. He introduced me to a man who had hand-made a stack of blank diaries to

give away to the kids. They had hard covers collaged with magazine cuttings and were bound with ribbon – the kind that would sell well at a high-end boutique. Our friend Shannon was putting up the microphone and preparing to read ‘A tisket a tasket’ to warm up the crowd in his role as MC. Other men were gift-wrapping donated books or assembling favors for the kids. They were giddy, and underpinning that current was nerves. I asked Shannon if his family was coming; he hesitated and then he told me no – yes his mother had promised to bring them, but he knew people get very busy - he wasn’t going to count on anything.

As soon as the program had started – when the room was full with children and women of all ages - it started to be ignored. Shannon read his story and the schedule of activities was announced, but instead of splitting off with their kids, the inmates dissolved into their families. They strolled together around the hall in small clusters as if it were a piazza, some men leading their families and some following, but each attached and enveloped.

When Shannon announced that Touchstones was beginning the discussion for women between the face painting station and the informational display on childhood obesity, I had to laugh. I couldn’t imagine creating a discussion amidst all the noise and distraction. Moreover, the idea that a mother or a wife would choose to leave her fragile family to enter the sterile environment of a text with me seemed absurd. I winced to recall that I had picked the chilly observations of the stoic Epictetus for our discussion that morning.

A few women drifted dutifully to our circle of chairs, and their initial skepticism deepened as I described our mission. My co-leader, Ed, an inmate of longstanding involvement with Touchstones, kept them engaged while I went to recruit more participants. I found Shannon at a table, jubilant, with a cadre of aunts and children, and I knew he wasn’t going anywhere with me. When I finally returned to our corner we were several women and a family group with inmate and child. I was determined to lead the group in our usual way, so we formed a huddle within the crowd and I read aloud some of Epictetus’ observations on freedom. We shouted questions to one another over the general noise. The child wandered off toward the dessert table and

after a look from the mother, his father followed after. We dwindled further as passing relatives handed off fussing babies to the seated women. Soon, Ed and I were left alone in discussion with a very small group of deeply impassioned women.

Epictetus says that we are free in the things that are within our power – that our actions are free, but our bodies, our property, and our reputations are not. The women’s attention snapped to this statement. Our reputations lie so close to our identities that they are difficult to distinguish. The women wanted to know how Epictetus could say that we are not their authors. As we worked with this question, somebody asked if anybody in the group had their reputation impacted by somebody else’s actions, actions over which they had no control. Unsurprisingly, each of them had – each woman had a son, a lover, a husband behind bars. The intensity of our discussion surged in response – this mutual entanglement of honor and shame was what the women wanted to talk about, what they needed to unravel and understand.

None of the women in our group was proud to be there. Each had come because they loved someone enough to allow their life to be blurred by another’s. One older woman told us that she hasn’t told her coworkers that her son is locked up again, because she doesn’t want to hear them excuse her if she were to falter in her work. A beautiful girl told us that she had only brought her baby to prison that day because the child was too young yet to keep the memory later on. She said, ‘after all, a lot of men don’t want their children to see them locked up’. A second young woman told the girl that this was her first year at the event; she had been telling her children that their father was away and in school – ‘which is true’ she added. Yet this year she felt so bad for him that she gave in. The women are burdened and divided – they don’t know if it is better or worse for the children to see their fathers on the inside.

Ed is eager for a chance to speak. He tells the women how deeply powerful these events are for the men. He tells the women that the visits from them and their children are what make the inmates want to be men. He tells them what it means for a man inside prison to commit to education, to Touchstones - what it says about who that man intends to become. The women hang on his words and I feel undone; it’s not a

discussion about Epictetus any more, our group has lost its way. The next event is announced and helpful inmates come to take our chairs back into the ranks. But the women won't give them up, and we keep on discussing.

People try to give each other what they need. Our women needed to know what the worth of their generosity was, the price of the pride they gave up to walk with their children into a prison, just to give an inmate back his family for a day. Ed's children are grown, he is not returning to the outside. He speaks urgently for the other men's needs. He needs to speak for other men's needs.

I suppose I had thought these men were orphans, stoics. I didn't think about the people that loved them; I didn't imagine that there were people that they themselves needed. In our Touchstones discussions we re-make ourselves; we leave out of our stories the parts that don't fit our discovery of the moment, the parts that would hold us back. Sometimes we leave out the people who loved us way back in our weakness. Sometimes we need to leave out the people for the love of whom we have lowered our pride.

What I saw that morning between Ed and the women wasn't Touchstones, but it somehow happened because of Touchstones. The voices of the women were the complement to the voices of the men I've known for so long. I had finally met their shadow halves. I hadn't contrived a Touchstones discussion but instead experienced the re-assertion of what Touchstones leaves out – the history, the context, the relationships, the debts. We push out alone to put our past behind us or to re-align our futures with our desires. And following that swell there comes an ebb while we stretch our hands back out to those who have shared themselves with us in our weakness and imperfection. This ebb, the reassertion of bonds and re-formation of love, takes its own special form: chaotic, un-self conscious, venial, exultant.

Reflections on Prison

Michael W.

Touchstones Prison Volunteer

I am new to the Touchstones Prison Ministry. I had some very meaningful initial training, some wonderful rides to and from the prison with other Touchstone volunteers, and so far two chances to experience Touchstones inside prison.

Experience is the key word for me because the Touchstones prison experience is like no other experience I have had. Prisons and prisoners evoke visceral feelings of fear, anxiety, loathing, even hate.

My Touchstones experiences have been gentle, warm, respectful, with just the right doses of humor and the intellectual added into the discussions. I have been deeply touched by the longing for respect and meaningful human interactions that the prisoner-volunteers look for and achieve with the Touchstones method. It seems that *slick* has been checked at the door.

I am still experiencing the unease of my own questions about the why and the how of what I am doing, about getting it right, about smoothly moving through the physical barriers and into the classroom. Maybe I will never get it all right. That does not seem important. It really is being there, doing it, and being part of something that seems to work.

Reconciling What a Person Has Done With Who the Person Actually Is

Michelle S.

For seven weeks I sat in community with approximately a dozen men Maryland Correctional Institute-Jessup (MCI-J), a medium security men's prison facility, discussing ...

Each week it became more difficult for me 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 that happened inside Maryland State prisons called me one day. I understand that his purpose was to caution me about the character of these men. After a 30-minute monologue about the horrors that go on inside these facilities, I asked him how he, or any other prison authority, accounts for the goodness in each person. He came up speechless.

Each man had great insight to offer based on the reading as well as significant contributions from his personal history. Snippets about an alcoholic parent, physical abuse in the home as well as 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, those issues that when I encounter them evoke a visceral response-abuse, forced foreign religions, and poverty to name a few.

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 together and allows the grappling of the difficult issues. Could God be in the midst of this group? In my opinion, the answer is of course. God is with God's creatures – good or bad, for better or for worse, and in prison, in the world and in the church building. 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.

Last Week

Forrest H.

Touchstones Prison Program Volunteer

Last week I took part in my first Touchstones prison inmate discussion. In the springtime months leading up to my graduation last May at St. John's College in Santa Fe, I'd shared with many my plans to serve an internship this summer for the Touchstones Discussion Project in Annapolis. I would elaborate, "I'll have seminars with prison inmates." And now here I was, entering MCI-J, and more than a little uneasy at the barbed-wire fences, handcuffs, and mechanical doors. This was something more than the first-day jitters. We entered the classroom to find the inmates waiting for us. I took a seat beside a man who observed as we introduced ourselves that it was my first time in a prison. My discomfort was written on my face. I felt like an outsider and *they* knew it.

Shortly thereafter the discussion commenced and my worries began to slip away. The inmates were friendly, courteous, and encouraging. They wanted to be here and they wanted *us* to be with them. We laughed. Our discussion was thoughtful, but not without its difficulties. I can't pretend that amidst the novelty of new faces and the feelings of foreboding evoked in me by the facility's security measures that I remember or understand everything that took place. However, I can say that I look forward to going back. I have much to learn about being a member of a discussion group, and it's thanks to Touchstones, the collaboration of the dedicated staff, volunteers, and the inmates themselves, that I have so welcoming a discussion to take part in.

A few of the things I love...

Jake D.

Touchstones Prison Volunteer

I love that all but one of the people that go into the prison for a Touchstones discussion are nothing more than discussion participants. Not leaders or experts or therapists or people offering solutions. But equals, individual perspectives ready to interact with and learn from other participating individual perspectives.

I love that the prisoners use the Touchstones discussions as safe moments to reveal and exercise their geekiness. I love hearing the prisoners talk about fear and anger abstractly and, then, as the discussion matures, explain some of the very specific fear and anger that pushed them toward and often into prison.

I love the moments when one participant mentions another by name, returns to a point or thought that the other had previously offered to the group, affirms its importance, and re-communicates it with a new example or new metaphor, just in case some other participants hadn't understood it the first time.

I love leaving a Touchstones discussion and exchanging thanks. I love the sincerity with which everyone tells each other how good it was to spend that time together.

Some Thoughts from Prisoners 2009

How might the world be different if more people were part of Touchstones groups?

-There's a possibility that a higher state of compassion and empathy could be reached which could lead to a greater awareness for the collective good.

-Issues could be resolved before they are allowed to get past a point where things can't be resolved without any show of power or intimidation.

-Released inmates better prepared to reenter, inmates better at self understanding.

-You would be able to see how others think based on their opinions.

-It couldn't help but to be a better place if for no other reason than the increased communication fostered by the group.

-By learning to listen better we might learn to learn from one another.

-It can break down barriers between people who previously were predisposed to stereotypes about others

-I believe that people will be able to make better choices in choosing ways for the world.

-There is a sort of control, order and respect for one another in the group that I would like to see in the world.

Why do you choose to come to Touchstones?

-I like being engaged in thought provoking conversations.

-Because I just can't say, "No."

- To learn and to contribute.

-I enjoy the change or different views shared, as well as the interaction with each other.

-Touchstones chose me.

How has Touchstones impacted you personally?

-It has allowed me to maintain an intellectual side in an irrational environment.

-One evening a week out of the "game" - A grounding effect in a crazy situation.

-It has allowed me to realize my potential for interaction with a diverse group of persons, intellectually as well as philosophically.

-I have learned how to be a little more sociable with different people.

If there were one thing that you wanted to share with the world about Touchstones, what would that be?

-To remember that the world is made up of many different cultures and each culture has something to contribute to the world.

-It's a place where any opinion counts for something even if it's not worth anything.

-You can learn a lot more about yourself by learning to listen to others.

-There should be more, all over the world.

-Touchstones is a high road for the next generation; it will teach us to share for the world.

My Experience with Touchstones and the Maryland Correctional Institute in Jessup

Joan C.

Touchstones Prison Program Volunteer

Inside, which took about ½ an hour, we all gathered in a large classroom and after a brief moment of “hellos” we passed out the reading and the pencils and formed a circle with chairs and sat down. The reading for the discussion was taken from a text written by Thucydides which was a debate about which government (Democracy, Aristocracy, or Oligarchy) was best.

The ages of the men in the circle ranged from early 20's to mid 70's, and some of the elder inmates (I was informed) had been incarcerated for most of their adult lives. The men seemed to be more intimidated by my presence than I was by theirs. Because while outsiders may be “fair game,” or “fresh meat,” we are free to leave any time we want.

After about 10 minutes I had completely forgotten that I was in a prison surrounded by inmates, which is good in one sense and bad in another. It was good in that I was able to relax and participate, it was troublesome in that I had inadvertently let my defenses down and, in retrospect, could have revealed information about myself that was dangerous for them to know.

In the end, I felt somewhat overwhelmed by the atmosphere. It made me wonder what motivated Howard and our volunteers to go in week after week. Because if you're looking for a mere adventure, or if you're going in just from curiosity or for the thrill of being inside a prison with inmates, then the real thing will certainly be humbling. The Touchstones Prison Program deals with real people with real issues who happen to be convicted criminals who happened to have gotten caught and who are now behind bars. Going inside made me appreciate the strength and courage of the Touchstones staff and the Touchstones volunteers. But my strongest impression of the Touchstones Prison Program is that IT REQUIRES A DIFFERENT KIND OF COURAGE and IT WORKS.