

Howard Zeiderman has been a tutor at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, for 33 years. At St. John's, the undergraduates read, study, and discuss classic texts from literature, philosophy, theology, mathematics, psychology, political science, economics, and history. In contrast to other universities, the faculty members (called tutors) don't give lectures. Instead, students meet in seminars with the tutors to explore the great books of the Western tradition.

In 1985, Zeiderman took this approach and cofounded the nonprofit Touchstones Discussion Project. Through short readings of classic texts, participants in Touchstones seminars learn how to cooperate, solve problems, and lead others.

LORD: What inspired you to create the program?

ZEIDERMAN: Touchstones was created as a complement to regular curricula at schools. It's a structured program that enables students to learn to participate [in] and lead exploratory discussions... In a Touchstones session, you might have a twenty-minute discussion on some short text, and then you'll have the group analyze what happened in twenty or thirty minutes. What was the discussion like? Was there dominance? Did people collaborate? The Touchstones program is about being able to think collaboratively and share leadership while respecting different perspectives, because everyone comes into these discussions with certain skills... My concern at St. John's was that even though you have people who are highly motivated and highly intelligent, and the classes can be very powerful, very frequently, there is a real imbalance in participation. But I came to believe that it had nothing to do with the chemistry among the individuals. It really had to do with the habits we developed through our lives and the educational systems we went through.

LORD: How so?

ZEIDERMAN: We've been educated to believe that there's someone in the room, the teacher, the leader, the professor who has the answer and that we are really talking to that person. That person is the expert and we are more or less dependent on that leader for answers and approval. Touchstones is designed to get people past thinking this way.

LORD: So that people understand they can really talk [to] and learn from one another?

ZEIDERMAN: Right... [People] have to decide how we're going to live together as a community, because, right now, I feel all sense of community has fallen apart – not just here – but in the whole world.

LORD: Give me an example of a text you'd use.

ZEIDERMAN: Let's say a sample text in Touchstones would be the essay, *About Revenge*, by Francis Bacon. Everyone knows as much as anyone else about getting even. All of us have done that. So if we start talking about what it's like to get even, it's not as if someone in the room has the right answer, because there's not a definite answer. We're really beginning to explore why we do what we do in society. We're using the text as a kind of touchstone to show us what we're like.

LORD: That's neat... a reference point against which other things can be evaluated[.]

