

February 2021

VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

www.touchstones.org

Beyond Curricular Expectations

By Greg Hodges, Ph.D., Board of Directors

The importance and value of collaborative, civic discourse has been pronounced in many of the organizations to which I have belonged. In this past year, one marked by changes and challenges, the conversations inspired by the Touchstones Discussion Project provided essential avenues for connection. Trinity College School (TCS) has benefited from a successful partnership with Touchstones by having students at various levels and across grade cohorts use several different texts, ranging from *Touchpebbles* to *Mapping the Future*.

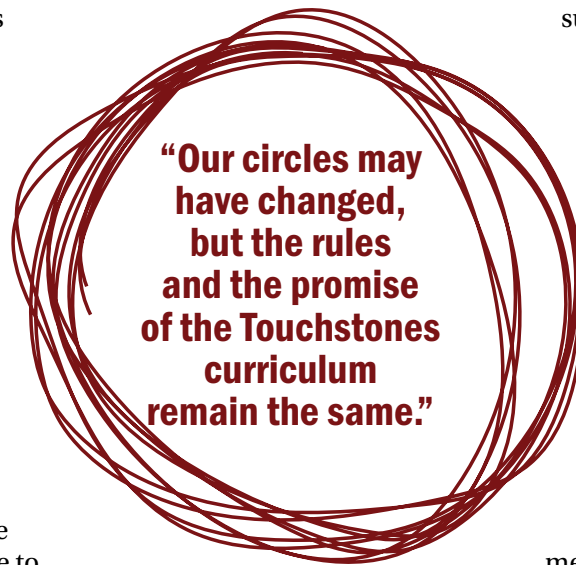
Including Touchstones in a school located in a small town on the shore of Lake Ontario has its own difficulties and rewards. Working within a highly structured, provincially moderated curricular program, the project itself can shine, in part, due to its focus on the cultivation of skills. Liberty, to a degree, is the product of collective and collaborative conversation. Some of the students that I have been working with are wearied, showing signs of fatigue and frustrated expectation. Touchstones gives students a reason to turn on the camera and engage through technology. Our circles may have changed, but the rules and the promise of the Touchstones curriculum remain the same. There is a chance for our classes to

convene for a reason beyond curricular expectation. Online platforms provide new avenues along which participants might venture to continue critical

discussions. Analog models of discourse need not be thought of as having been supplanted by technological modes of engagement. Instead, students have the opportunity to reflect meaningfully upon the time that they will spend learning together. It is important for us to be aware of the increased emphasis upon what it means to be seen, to be heard, and to feel that there is a relational space.

The efforts made by the team at Touchstones have helped new participants find ways to connect and converse through digital media. Thanks to the work being applied to integrate virtual meetings and to render the volumes both as digital and interactive, Touchstones is opening its circle all the more.

Touchstones is delighted to announce that Dr. Hodges is the newest member of the Touchstones Board of Directors. Greg brings his tremendous commitment to education and a passion for discussion-based learning (and the great outdoors) to enrich and guide our current and future endeavors.



“Our circles may have changed, but the rules and the promise of the Touchstones curriculum remain the same.”

Through inclusive discussion-based programming, we develop highly effective speakers, listeners, critical thinkers and collaborative leaders.



A Year in Review

Alexandra Fotos, Office of Annual & Planned Giving

2020 was a challenge, yet Touchstones Discussion Project moved ahead and reconfigured itself very successfully! Here are some highlights from 2020:

The year began with a special challenge match by Jill Wilkinson and current members of the Board of Directors to raise funds for the Geoffrey J. Comber Touchstones Teacher of the Year Award and the Touchstones Educator Scholarship Program. With enthusiastic participation from donors around the world, this special campaign raised more than \$30,000 to recognize and support teacher development and discussion-based learning. A portion of the funds was immediately applied to provide teacher workshop seats online, class sets, and online coaching and instructional support for free to those who had no funding. Additional funds were used to convert print classroom books to digital formats—access we provided to hundreds of teachers at no cost, as they scrambled to find effective instructional content and programs for online instruction. By December, more than 189 teachers were using Touchstones digitally with more than 4500 students! Some of the dozens of schools that benefited were Charles County Public Schools in MD, Trinity College School in Ontario, and Learning Community Charter School in NJ, as well as sites entirely new to Touchstones: Maine's Mount Desert Island Regional School System, Paterson Charter School in NJ, and Twin Falls Middle School in ID.

At the same time, we wanted to keep adults connected during the pandemic, too. In March 2020, we launched the Saturday Community Program to explore issues of connection and community. Running twice monthly, this public program engaged more than 48

individuals in 17 discussions—for a total of 175 “seats” overall. To make similar opportunities available to educators specifically and explore inclusion and equity in society and the classroom, Howard Zeiderman introduced an online program last fall. Using Touchstones *Exploring American Perspectives Vol 1*—which includes works exclusively by African American poets, writers, philosophers, statesmen, and fine artists—this focused program considers and appreciates uniquely American historical and contemporary experiences and perspectives. Based on a resoundingly successful first run, a second section of this program will launch in March 2021.

To wrap up last year, Touchstones hosted an online art exhibition. *Elements of Perspective* featured paintings from the collection of works bequeathed to Touchstones in 2019 by Elliott Zuckerman. Nearly 100 people attended seven online discussion events and the exhibition received more than 1,000 hits. The exhibition, including 11 works for sale, is now permanently part of our website: www.touchstones.org/art.

Before closing 2020, we also celebrated the Geoffrey J. Comber Touchstones Teacher of the Year to honor ALL teachers everywhere for their tireless efforts during an exceedingly difficult period. We also recognized John Christensen as the Volunteer of the Year for his steadfast support—from helping at fundraising events to folding and stuffing newsletters (like this one!)—time and again. Thank you, John!

The abbreviated but impressive roster of work last year was possible only with your support, volunteerism, charitable gifts, and advocacy for Touchstones. **We appreciate everything you do to advance the Touchstones Discussion Project—thank you!**

Why there are always poems and sometimes even poets

By Olivia Braley, Stefanie Takacs, and Howard Zeiderman

For more than 25 years, Touchstones staff ran executive programs in-person in Washington, DC and New York. Although highly customized in many ways, most of those programs had one characteristic in common: none of them featured contemporary texts. In the past seven years, though, we've shifted to programs designed increasingly around modern works. The purpose of these programs remains the same: engage professional adults in the process of examining and modifying their presuppositions through collaborative discussion. And while they are all Touchstones programs, these executive offerings depart in some significant ways from the process method we follow in other settings. Instead, the focus here is on self-reflection and using the works read to reveal ourselves more completely. Such efforts, we believe, are useful starting points in forming our futures.

Our newest program—on modern poetry—launches this winter. These texts were selected primarily by Olivia Braley, our Programs and Office Assistant, with input from our Director of Leadership Programs, Howard Zeiderman. Olivia, who joined the Touchstones staff in September, is a poet with an educational background in creative writing from the University of Maryland. She and Zeiderman will co-lead this eight-meeting program.

In choosing the writers for this group, Olivia looked to poets who encompass a wide range of style, subject matter, and personal background. “The world of modern poetry is perhaps more diverse in form and voice than ever,” she says,



“and it’s important to look to writers who represent that in their written as well as lived experience.” The featured poets in this program cover multiple spectra of ages, genders, races, ethnicities, and sexualities. These components of their identities emerge in their poetry in ways as varied as they are. All collections on the program reading list are written in the last 20 years and include writers Claudia Rankine, Jericho Brown, Anne Carson, Ilya Kaminsky, and others. This “living” aspect of the poetry invites the group to consider these poems in real time—leading naturally to questions about the role of poetry in our present world. It also raises issues of how language and world interact to shape one another.

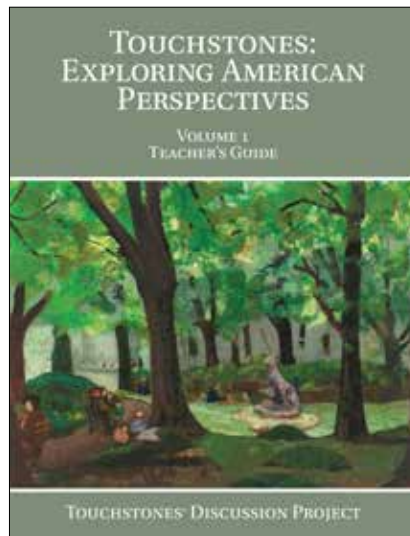
Like the poets, the participants in this group come from different backgrounds but are united in their interest to read and consider the role of language as it affects our lives. Though the role of language may be more pronounced in certain fields—such as education or law—all people are sensitive to language, regardless of profession. It is the locus of our humanity. This Touchstones poetry program serves as a way to delve into this sensitivity and explore language working at its most acute. There, the group is concerned with the very structure of language, sounds, and form.

Exploring American Perspectives: A Uniquely Touchstones Publication

Touchstones Roving Reporter

Exploring American Perspectives is a Touchstones volume first published in 2012. It is a four-unit volume focused on developing critical thinkers and collaborative leaders. Where it differs from typical Touchstones volumes is in its text selection; most Touchstones

volumes feature works from widely diverse cultures and traditions. Aside from its orientation lesson, the remainder of *this* volume is comprised solely of works by African American and Black contributors from the Colonial era through the 1960’s US Civil Rights Movement. To clarify what Touchstones aims to achieve with this particular volume, I sat down virtually with one of the volume’s pedagogical authors,



A Shady Nook, by Lois Mailou Jones, graces the volume cover.

Howard Zeiderman. “This volume is important in two main ways,” he said. “One, the chronological path of the works by African American authors in some ways mirrors what participants themselves strive to do in a Touchstones program: find their voices and shed hierarchical power structures that block collaboration and inclusion. And, while the goal was never to solve race relations, we did want to help people in homogeneous or isolated communities experience how perspectives from underrepresented individuals and groups can meaningfully reshape their own thinking and understanding.”

As part of Touchstones’ civic goals, and in an effort to increase

awareness of this volume, Zeiderman organized a group of twelve educators and others invested in inclusion and reconciliation—to work through the first two units of the volume together. To get a sense of what it’s like to be in the group, I spoke with some members about their experience.¹ In general, they focused on the respectful attitude of the group and the power of the Touchstones method. One participant noted how beginning and ending each discussion with something outside the potentially heated topic—reviewing the ground rules at the beginning and ending with evaluation—facilitated meaningful and dynamic changes in the group. Another participant presciently echoed Zeiderman’s sentiment, noting that the text selection, lesson structure, and the way the group is developing feel organically and intentionally interconnected. An example of this was cited in a lesson on a letter narrated by a former slave and written by his former master. In that discussion, the group began questioning what it means to hear an unimpeded voice or if such a task is possible—not as a historical issue but as a current issue present in the group.

The success of this group is inspiring to its members and yours truly, and it’s already led to new implementations of the volume. Additionally, schools already using this volume consistently report back impressive outcomes. The consideration of perspectives that are not otherwise equally represented in society is foundational to the Touchstones model. And *Exploring American Perspectives* uniquely highlights some of the benefits that arise when individuals—formerly strangers—form a new community in their exploration of voice, belonging, and necessary diversity.

¹Reported anonymously because the group is ongoing



An Artist's View: An Interview with Stacey Turner

Olivia Braley, Office and Program Asst.

From late November into early December, Touchstones held an online art exhibition showcasing the dynamic work of Elliot Zuckerman. As part of this exhibition, Touchstones hosted a number of online discussions and panels featuring artists and members of the community to engage actively with Zuckerman's work. I spoke with Stacey Turner, one of the panelists, about her experience and impression of her first Touchstones discussions. Stacey is a visual artist, former art educator, and my mother.

Our conversation began with her general impression of a Touchstones discussion group. She participated in a discussion of Elliot Zuckerman's artwork on the first day of the exhibition, having no prior Touchstones experience. She said the conversation immediately sparked her interest; it "was thought-provoking and refreshing to interact with new people in a safe environment." It's not always that you get to talk about and listen to people discuss a topic meaningfully, she added. In the isolating digital world that we are currently navigating, Stacey especially appreciated the opportunity for "designated time to listen to interesting people and talk about interesting things." Though it was her first Touchstones discussion and she didn't know anyone in the group, she told me it was clear the people were friendly and the environment welcoming.

We spent the majority of our conversation talking about her experience being on the panel



Elliot Zuckerman's, *Figuration 13* (1997), oil on canvas with charcoal.

and the ways considering art this way was different from her experience as a painter herself, and as a children's educator. She said, "I know that when I paint or even look at others' paintings, I'm looking at them from a practical point of view—either my perspective or from the perspective of the person who created them. I'm always trying to get in the artist's head, and that colors my interpretation of what I'm seeing." It's likely that all people have experiences that similarly cloud their impression of the things they encounter. However, in the Touchstones groups, these experiences meld together to deepen the discussion as a whole. Stacey noticed that "in the panel, the benefit of having thoughtful people who have different experiences in the arts, different backgrounds, and different points of views was clear. I got to express my thoughts while getting an exposure to other interpretations that gave me a fresh view from another perspective." In having some of her perspective taken away, she could see the art differently than before.

I asked Stacey if she had any closing thoughts about the

Touchstones discussions. She said, "Something that in my experience is very unique to Touchstones is the level of respect I felt. It was more than just politeness: there was a level of acceptance, tolerance, and civility that was wonderful." She added that she felt that with Touchstones you "could bring in people with vastly opposed ideas and would still have a forum to discuss, which is very important. Most groups are not tailored in such a way that it is ever possible, much less something that can be reproduced regularly."

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