

April 2020

# VOICES



The Newsletter of the Touchstones® Discussion Project

[www.touchstones.org](http://www.touchstones.org)

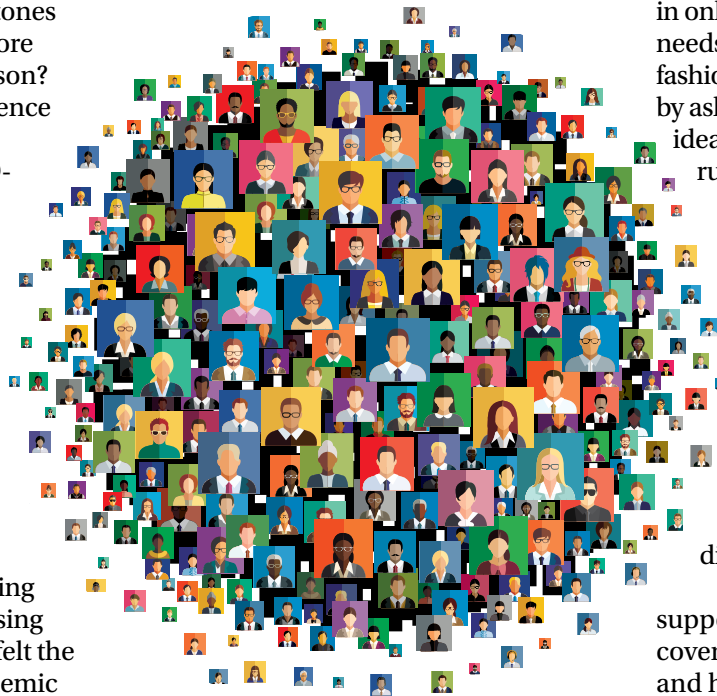
## Our Approach to Uncertainty

*Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director*

**W**e at Touchstones are well-versed in and quite comfortable with situations of high uncertainty—what is more unpredictable than a Touchstones workshop or discussion or more uncertain than entering a prison? However, there is little experience that adequately prepares one for a crisis such as the COVID-19 emergency. Fortunately, our organization has an incredibly talented and dedicated Board of Directors and nimble staff. I want to share some of what we are doing to ensure as much long-term organizational stability as possible while continuing to meet our mission.

Weeks prior to the Governor of Maryland declaring a state of emergency or imposing a stay-at-home mandate, we felt the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic from the West Coast. Anticipating a national crisis, we took steps to ensure staff could safely and effectively work remotely, which we are now doing. When earned income from Touchstones books and educational services came to a grinding halt in early March, we immediately worked with teachers, schools, districts

and other clients to assure them we will be here when they return to normal operating. And when face-to-face executive and community



programming was no longer an option, we transitioned to online discussion meetings where possible.

Because Touchstones has been a hybridized social venture non-profit for decades, we've learned through hard-earned experience that times of great adversity require tremendous

creativity, focus, and flexibility. To meet the challenges and needs teachers and people everywhere are facing now, we're bringing together educators in online discussions to share their needs and—in true Touchstones fashion—teach and learn together by asking questions and sharing ideas and knowledge. We're also running online discussions open to the community, so people can meaningfully connect at a time of profound confusion. And we're providing continued, individualized support to clients by offering digital access to materials teachers, schools, and districts have already purchased, as well as guidance about how to bring Touchstones to life in the digital realm.

We are also asking for special support from funders and donors to cover salary and general operating and have completed applications for both State grants and Federal loans, so we remain fully able to serve people during and after this crisis. Most importantly, we remain profoundly thankful to everyone in the extended Touchstones family for your encouragement and continued engagement and wish you all good health and safety.

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



## Honoring the Legacy of Geoffrey J. Comber

*Compiled & edited by Lynn Cloutier,  
Office & Operations Manager*



Last November, Touchstones received the very sad news that one of the founders of the Touchstones Discussion Project had passed away. Geoffrey J. Comber was one of three men who laid the foundation for this organization. In 1984, Geoff and two other professors (tutors) from St. John's College in Annapolis, MD worked on understanding the benefits and barriers encountered in discussion-based learning. Their inquiries led to the formation of the Touchstones Discussion Project. In their examination of why discussion-based learning does or doesn't succeed in different groups, Geoff, along with Howard Zeiderman and Nicholas Maistrellis, intensively and thoroughly investigated the socio-behavioral and cultural habits that influence how people see themselves as viable and legitimate voices in discussion. They explored the particular impediments that typically hinder authentic engagement and

shared inquiry as attempted in other seminar type programs.

As the first president of Touchstones, Geoff brought tremendous energy and enthusiasm to his work in building and growing our role in public education. His unwavering advocacy and fervent belief in discussion-based education continued long after his retirement from Touchstones, and he remained active in supporting Touchstones throughout his later years. Geoff was a visionary and his leadership always looked to the larger world and actual classroom teachers and their responsibilities. He wanted Touchstones to enable educators everywhere and at all stages of education to achieve the goals they had when they choose to become teachers.

Since 2011, Touchstones has recognized an exemplary Touchstones educator with the Teacher of the Year award. Thanks to Cynthia M. Barry, who first sponsored the award and who is herself a long-time Touchstones teacher, the intent is to celebrate others advancing our work in the classroom and beyond. Now, with Geoff's family's blessing and Cindy's heartfelt approval, we have renamed the award to the Geoffrey J. Comber Touchstones Teacher of the Year Award and created the Touchstones Educator Scholarship Program. By recognizing an educator whose values and efforts echo those at the core of Geoff's leadership and vision, this award commemorates Geoff's dedication to Touchstones and his many, many contributions over the years.

In honor of Geoff's memory and the legacy he helped shape through his work at Touchstones, Jill Wilkinson—a founding member of the Touchstones Board of Directors—along with the current Board members have launched a special challenge match. Contributions made to Touchstones until May 31,

2020 support the newly named Geoffrey J. Comber Touchstones Teacher of the Year Award, and our Educator Scholarship Program which provides free training and materials to teachers who have no other funding. All gifts received—up to a combined total of \$10,000—will be matched dollar for dollar by both the Wilkinson Challenge and by the Touchstones Board Challenge, *tripling* the funds received by Touchstones. For example, a gift of \$250 becomes \$750 with the two matches. So far, we've received gifts and pledges from 37 individuals. Thank you to all who have already participated in the challenge match and thanks in advance to those who will now make sure we reach our \$30,000 goal!

Many of the contributions have come from former students and colleagues of Geoff's. One former student wrote how Geoff had been instrumental in her receiving a scholarship for graduate school. Another former student wrote, "Geoff had a profound impact on me to think both critically, clearly and calmly so it is an honor to support this project in his name."

He was always looking out towards the growth of students, teachers, and administrators, who in turn trusted Geoff for his integrity and candor. His passion for education and teacher development was unrivaled. Geoff was originally from Erith, Kent, England and served in the bomb disposal unit in the British army during WWII. He graduated from the Royal College of Music, London, and was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to attend Ohio State University where he received graduate and post-graduate degrees in music and philosophy. He began his teaching career at Huron University College, Ontario and later joined the faculty of St. John's College in Annapolis where he taught for 25 years and was the first director of the Annapolis Graduate Institute. Geoff co-founded



the Touchstones Discussion Project in 1984, and 36 years later our partnerships with thousands of educators and millions of students who have participated in Touchstones programs around the world stand as proof that Geoff was not only wise but also a true visionary.

Geoff will be missed by all who knew and loved him, but his memory and life's work will be carried on through the programs, curriculum, and materials of the Touchstones Discussion Project.

## Joining Touchstones

*Abraham Zhao, Project Coordinator*

**R**oughly a year ago, I was invited to participate in a Touchstones educator workshop. Between my education at St. John's College and other book clubs I had run with friends since high school, I felt as though I had a lot of experience with group discussions. I went into the

It's hard for me to describe how much I value the work Touchstones does without repeating the things everyone receiving this newsletter already knows: it promotes critical thinking, collaboration, leadership skills, and self-guided learning. Instead, let me offer a brief argument for why these traits are more important than ever. In this digital age, clear communication is king. Whether this means navigating issues of tone in textual communication, the ability to understand and articulate what you're looking for (that is, the ability to accurately Google things), or the ability to deliver short messages in the right way to the right audience, Touchstones helps learners get in touch with what they are trying to say. Furthermore, the programs effectively demonstrate how participants can improve. It is my experience that students who are criticized for poor communication in traditional classroom settings do not tend to drastically improve—they

*“I am simply the kind of person who is hard-pressed to find anything more enjoyable than time well-spent in good conversations with good friends.”*

workshop with high expectations but still found myself amazed at the depth of the conversation and the growth of the participants as a group in such a short period of time.

Touchstones addresses issues that arise in most approaches to discussion-based learning. Where seminar-style education can be academic and removed, Touchstones does its best to make sure that learners are consistently engaged in critical self-examination through text. Where discussion-based programs can struggle to break free from leadership dynamics, Touchstones puts learners in charge. Where casual reading groups can run on shared anecdotes, Touchstones manages to turn personal experience into opportunities for reflection.

sometimes even regress further—but the mix of collaborative and individual reflection in Touchstones allows for development at a truly personalized level.

Touchstones encourages an attitude of lifelong learning and promotes self-knowledge, two principles I highly value. Furthermore, I am simply the kind of person who is hard-pressed to find anything more enjoyable than time well-spent in good conversations with good friends. As such, the decision to work at Touchstones came naturally to me: the organization's mission embraces the same sentiments as I do. I look forward to helping the Touchstones Discussion Project flourish and would like to thank all our readers for their continued support.

## Reflections from Within

*Jenn Macris, Outreach and Advancement Coordinator*

**F**yodor Dostoyevsky famously wrote that “the degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.” Recently I have been going into the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCI-W) to facilitate their weekly Touchstones discussions. Since joining Touchstones, I have led or participated in many different types of Touchstones groups, but the discussions at MCI-W have been truly eye-opening—perhaps even life-changing. Touchstones brings an element of civilization and humanity to these women that they desire and deserve.

Touchstones has always been motivated to give a voice to those in society who are often not heard due to individual, community, and societal dynamics. Touchstones discussions serve as a platform for these women to reflect on what they truly know, believe, and feel and to remain open and welcoming to what their fellow inmates know, believe and feel—without judgment. This is generally unheard of in a prison setting.

When I entered MCI-W for the first time, I was uneasy. I had never been in a prison. I must have appeared hesitant when going into the prison classroom where the students, women felons, were still seated in their normal rows of seats. As soon as they saw me, however, they moved their desks into a circle, distributed the Touchstones volumes, and asked for the attendance sheet, all without my asking. Quickly, the group was ready; it was clear this activity was important to them. And I felt welcomed with almost no introduction—I was immediately part of this group of caring human beings.



Many of these women will be released and return to their families and communities. The skills they are learning now are helping them develop their sense of dignity and self-worth. Their efforts will yield a great ripple effect well beyond themselves, showing true change can happen. I am also evolving through my experiences in these Touchstones discussions. I am becoming more aware of my incorrect, often unconscious, stereotypes of who are in our prisons and what these women have to offer our society. I feel fortunate to engage with these women and witness their growth, and mine, and that I am given the opportunity to help introduce and foster much-needed civility and humanity in the prison environment.

*Many thanks to [AAWGT](#) for a generous grant in 2019-2020 for this program.*

## Reinventing Home with Veterans

*An interview with Howard Zeiderman, Touchstones Co-founder & Director of Leadership Programs*

**I understand you're getting ready to release the newest Touchstones program volume. Tell me more.**

This program, called [Completing the Odyssey](#), helps returning veterans in their transition home after service. The title is a reference to Homer's Odyssey, in which the main character struggles for 10 years after battle to return home. In the story, Odysseus is told by a prophet that even once he returns to his kingdom of Ithaca, he will have to leave again. He will have to make yet one more journey before he can claim Ithaca as his home. I understand this second journey to be figurative—and it's one that distinguishes between returning to a physical place versus a home. Part of what this program offers veterans

is a dedicated time and structure in which to reflect on where they are on their own journeys home. By entering this exploration with other veterans, there's the added benefit of hearing different experiences and perspectives.

**That's so interesting. How did you start this project? What initiated your focus on veterans in this way?**

We've worked with veterans for decades in our programs in Maryland's prisons, but what spurred this project was an invitation from Bill Rice, the former director of the Education Division at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Bill knew our work in discussion-based and leadership programs and felt our particular approach to building listening and collaboration skills would be essential tools for veterans in returning home. Through the NEH's Dialogues on the Experience of War grant opportunity, he thought there was a special place for a new Touchstones program—one in which veterans run discussions about homecoming with fellow veterans. Two rounds of NEH funding later, we have developed, implemented, and refined that program and are now bringing it to the public in the form of a *Leader's Guide* and a *Participant's Guide*. As in all Touchstones programs, the Guides are developed to be used by people with varying experience running and participating in inclusive discussions.

**What sort of help did you receive along the way? Surely, you had a lot to learn about veterans' experiences in coming home and what a successful program needed to offer.**

We've been enormously fortunate to have enthusiastic input and support from a team of advisors,

including veterans and social service and mental health care providers who are also veterans or have expertise in veteran-related concerns. This project couldn't have happened without their partnership and that of their family members. We found that creating a home is a shared process of discovery for both the veteran and those in their lives who remained behind during service. For veterans who didn't return home to families, friends and colleagues became all the more important.

Each of us who worked on this project has learned a tremendous amount. As a civilian, I gained a deep appreciation for how much more active in their effort civilians must be to welcome and assist veterans in the complex and challenging process of coming home—whatever that means for each service member. And we need to do this in a way that acknowledges veterans' sacrifices and values the skills they bring back with them to our communities and country.

### 2020 Board of Directors

Kurt Redfield  
*Chair*

Howard Zeiderman  
*Vice Chair*

Nicholas Maistrellis  
*Board Secretary*

Debra Valentine  
*Treasurer*

Laurie de Grazia

Garreth Heidt

Rachel Lewis

Ford Rowan

Gregg Steinberg

Connect with us: [www.touchstones.org](http://www.touchstones.org)



Touchstones Discussion Project



@Touchpebbles

