

From *A Great Idea at the Time* by Alex Beam
PublicAffairs, New York, 2008
pp. 197-198

The Great Books are out there, to be sure. ... Three St. John's College tutors first introduced their Socratic, Great Books seminar pedagogy, called Touchstones, into an inner-city magnet school in Hartford, Connecticut in 1985. Over 500,000 men and women have since participated in Touchstones discussion groups, in school systems around the world, in prison, at the National Security Agency, and at the Austen Riggs mental hospital in western Massachusetts. Even though Touchstones used the texts of Plato, Aquinas, and other ancients, the phrase *Great Books* does not appear in any of their material. Cofounder Howard Zeiderman says Touchstones has modified, and improved upon, the "shared inquiry" model. I don't call it Great Books because that focuses on the text as a kind of artifact or museum piece," he says, "rather than on the experience of the people in the discussion. Our model is a kind of pilgrimage for the group; I am trying to turn leadership over to them. That would be heretical in other programs."