

The Men Inside

By Larry Bratt
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The discussion of Homer's "Iliad" took an unexpected turn from the textual question -- Why does Hector return to fight? -- to a question of pride. It's a concept Olurupo Byrd knows something about. He's serving 45 years for armed robbery at the Maryland Correctional Institution at Jessup.

"While on the streets, I thought I was a beast and could do anything I wanted," he said. "I had a reputation and fought to keep it. One day my homies asked me to do a stickup. Nothing new for me, except I had a bad feeling. But I didn't want to punk out. We committed the robbery and all ended up in prison."

Byrd deliberately looks at each Touchstoner. "Through Touchstones I realized my pride owned me and brought about my self-destruction," he said. "I can't justify my past actions, I can only hope to better my condition."

"I know what you mean," said Fred Newman, who is serving 10 years for auto theft. "I don't believe in miracles, but coming to Touchstones got me thinking about things I never imagined. When we discussed Bacon's essay on revenge, I saw how wrong I'd been living. And I decided not to get even with those people I felt wronged me."

Convicted felons accustomed to settling grievances through aggression and violence are learning the art of resolving differences through discussion in a program introduced last year at the Jessup facility. Designed after the acclaimed Great Books curriculum taught at St. John's College, in Annapolis, the Touchstones Discussion Project puts relevant excerpts from the classics of philosophy, literature and history in the hands of selected inmates as a starting point for discussion and introspection.

Initiated in 1984 in schools throughout America and later in retirement homes and senior citizen centers, the program now is proving effective in helping to build respect and cooperation behind bars. Like the fictitious convict Conrad Hensley in Tom Wolfe's novel "A Man in Full," who gained insight into his own strength of character reading an ancient Greek philosopher's thoughts, these Touchstoners are broadening their life's perspectives and horizons.

"I've always been a loner . . . but Touchstones made me work in small groups," said Mark Ingram, who is serving 22 years for second-degree murder. "Now I see the benefits of cooperation. It wasn't comfortable exposing feelings and thoughts, but I learned to do it. Cooperation helps make the texts easier to understand and also teaches respect. Respect makes doing time easier."

"Touchstoners take responsibility for their own education, learning new skills and training," said Franco Dega, who is serving four years for forgery. "Since coming here to group, my confidence and decision-making abilities are sounder. Last week my homie wanted me to help him sell some drugs. The quick money sounded good, you know. Then I stopped and thought about the big picture. The final cause, like Aristotle said, 'It tells you what something is good for, and this is what you really want to know.' Anyway, the consequences of getting caught, losing my job and possibly a shot at parole, convinced me this wasn't something I wanted to do. I declined. Without the flexibility Touchstones provides, I wouldn't have hesitated."

In living with and teaching fellow prisoners to read and write, and training those with GEDs to become tutors, I have seen Touchstones discussions take these individuals out of themselves so they begin to examine their own lives. Exposure to the classics and wisdom of the ages causes these men to explore more fully what it means to be human. They stop feeling sorry for themselves and begin to imagine the reality of things outside themselves.

Touchstones offers prisoners a chance to forge a more powerful sense of connectedness to the outside world. It increases the circle of empathy, and teaches the kinds of cognitive skills they will need in order not to commit crimes.

"Touchstones allows our participants to voice thoughts and feelings about their experiences in a safe setting," said my supervisor, Jewel Kesler, who originally approved our Touchstones pilot project for 11 inmates. Since then, she has agreed to make these weekly discussions a mandatory part of curriculum for the 110 members of the prison's literacy program, the Reading Academy.

Most prisoners, as I, are emotionally hungry and eager to break out of our egocentric viewpoints. Our lives have been chaotic. The very idea of putting our thoughts and our lives in order is a new habit. We all have suffered from poor consequential reasoning. Because we lack direction and sense of meaning in our lives, we're unable to envision alternative courses of action.

Touchstones provides us with the great philosophical tradition where we can explore the logic of our thinking through self-talk. From this we can see the things that might be clouding our moral reasoning or straining our values. As Socrates counseled centuries ago, always proceed empirically, or realistically.

By doing so, we begin to clarify meaning and values that can alter our whole lifestyle with a positive focus. Many Touchstoners in the Reading Academy claim they now carry a torch -- a light within that they didn't have before.

Coming to the end of his five-year sentence for arson, Danny Ayler recently told his Touchstones group, "Before I started this program my neighborhood was my world. Now a whole new realm has opened up to me. I think about world events. I watch 'World News Tonight' and I read the newspapers with help from friends. I want to travel and go to museums. These are things I never thought about before."

This type of educational opportunity for incarcerated people is what the creators want to accomplish. According to Howard Zeiderman, a founder of the Touchstones Discussion Project, "Education is the one route which enables prisoners to gain self- and mutual respect, feel they are human beings in spite of the circumstances in which they live, and also enable them to become skilled so that they have additional options once they leave prison."

According to the Roman philosopher Lucretius: "Whenever a thing changes and alters its nature, at that moment comes the death of what it was." Touchstones is helping to slay the urge to commit crime so that a productive future awaits Touchstoners when they leave prison and reenter society.

For information about the Touchstones program, write: Touchstones Discussion Project, 48 West St., Suite 104, Annapolis, Md. 21401; call 800-456-6542; fax, 410-974-8233. Or go to the Web site, www.touchstones.org; e-mail, tdp@touchstones.org

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