



## Adapting to a Remote-Access World

*Abraham Zhao, Program Coordinator*

The staff at Touchstones is hard at work making necessary transitions in this new educational environment online. Some teachers we have talked with believe the shape and nature of education has permanently changed due to the pandemic. I am inclined to agree. The coronavirus crisis has demanded adaptability from all walks of life and it seems the adaptations our education systems have made so far will remain as features of teaching even as things (hopefully) return to normal. While Touchstones is still fundamentally based on the in-person discussion experience, we have been exploring various ways to bring our tried and tested developmental programs successfully into the new, remote-access world.

Already this spring, we began converting our discussion curricula into digitally accessible formats. Schools from Canada, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, have already used those materials in different

days. For the foreseeable future, our workshops will be delivered online. Our staff has conducted a number of training and coaching sessions using Zoom and has run Teacher Meetups and Community Discussion

programs twice monthly since March. To help set the stage for constructive and inclusive discussions, we developed guidelines that encourage collaboration as much as possible. And the best news is that we have seen great results.

Just recently, Touchstones ran a two-day workshop for the [Mount Desert Island Regional School System](#) in Maine.

The school district has chosen Touchstones curricula as a complement to the work they are already doing to foster students' critical thinking but also to achieve new standards in civil discourse. My role was primarily to support



online environments. Sometimes the Touchstones classes are run in real-time with students connecting by video and other times students are conducting their discussion using written comments over several

has chosen Touchstones curricula as a complement to the work they are already doing to foster students' critical thinking but also to achieve new standards in civil discourse. My role was primarily to support

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



the workshop's technological requirements and the group in action but also to engage directly with teachers for certain activities, including small group work.

We were all relieved that there were almost no technical issues during the workshop (aside from two times when connectivity was briefly interrupted). And the participants helpfully followed our guidelines. Using many of the tools provided in Zoom for breakout rooms and polling, we're able to translate the small group work and evaluation that is central in the Touchstones method. The fluidity in the online delivery supported the same engagement, reflection, and authentic connections and bonds among participants that form during in-person workshops.

Over the two days, the group grew noticeably in their discussion skills and collaboration. Their evaluations revealed new insights and understanding. Most importantly, we heard them express how the workshop helped them identify better with their students as learners in this environment—to more fully anticipate what types of support their students will need as they get started with Touchstones this fall.

Shelagh McLoughlin, a high school social studies teacher, wrote of her experience afterward, "You provided such guidance with a steady hand, not shaming but asking us all to reflect and think critically. I feel so connected to our group, it feels strange not to be meeting again tomorrow... Everything is just so intentional I love every aspect of this and really think it will help all of us not just in our classrooms but with our professional relationships as well. Thank you for doing this work with us and so many groups around the world. The world certainly needs to talk to each other."

[You can learn more about our workshops by clicking here.](#)

## Shaping the New Normal

*Jennifer Macris, Advancement & Outreach Coordinator*

Like other non-profits, businesses and organizations around the world, Touchstones is moving forward in the new normal we all face due to the coronavirus pandemic. Thanks to loyal donors and generous foundations, our good work in education continues. We are especially pleased to announce that Touchstones was awarded, for a second year, a \$20,000 grant from [Anne Arundel Women Giving Together \(AAWGT\)](#) to continue our weekly discussion programs in the school at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCI-W) in Jessup, MD. Our AAWGT grant liaisons, who participated in that program at the prison in March, were able to see firsthand how their philanthropic investment in Touchstones is helping women inside to change their lives.

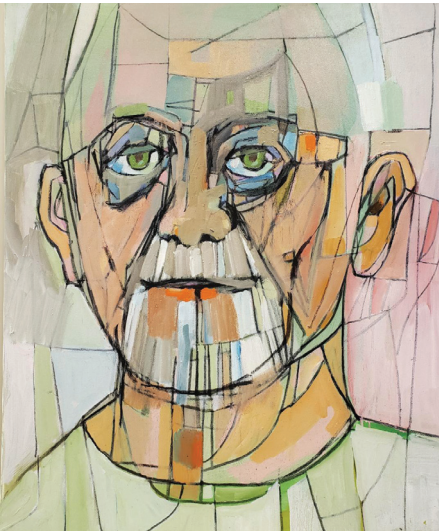
Cindy Whittle, one of our liaisons from AAWGT, recently shared this about her own experience and thoughts on Touchstones receiving another grant for this program: "I have truly enjoyed seeing the Touchstones program in action. It was an emotional experience to see the women at Jessup embracing the discussions and committing to the process. I was touched by the level of engagement and the thoughtful way participants respond to each other. Touchstones empowers the women to make better choices, to understand other participants' viewpoints, and is an asset for these women. I am so pleased that AAWGT understood that and voted to extend the funding for another year."

Although the prison program will look different due to additional safety measures when programming starts again, the core teaching and

learning together will remain the same. This will be true even if our discussions initially take place with Touchstones staff joining remotely. We look forward to working with the prison school staff and the women incarcerated at MCI-W with a renewed focus on strengthening skills of civil discourse, reflective thinking, and cooperative learning—skills that serve us all well. Working together, we'll honor each other's experiences and ideas and strive to establish the mutual trust and regard we know is required for collaborative learning.

In addition to our renewed partnership with AAWGT, Touchstones hopes to further develop existing partnerships with two other local organizations: [Girl Scouts of Central Maryland \(GSCM\)](#) and [Seeds 4 Success](#). Last year, we worked with the Girl Scouts to produce a unique program at the Waxter Juvenile Detention Center for young women in Laurel, MD, which GSCM is hoping to expand. Likewise, Seeds 4 Success, which provides comprehensive, intensive, and academically focused programs to low-income youth and their families in Annapolis, has applied for a grant to bring Touchstones programs with a community engagement and civic leadership focus to afterschool programming at high schools across Anne Arundel County, MD.

The Touchstones staff is excited to move forward with each of these partnerships and continue our vital endeavors—be it in person or virtually—to foster critical thinking, collaboration, and community. For 34 years, we've been developing and implementing programs that yield a more inclusive, respectful, and connected society. Never before has our country been as ready as they are now to join us in these crucial endeavors.



Elliott Zuckerman *Self-portrait as Landscape #1*. 1999

## Transformative Giving

*Alexandra Fotos, Office of Annual & Planned Giving*

Last year, Touchstones received an [extraordinary gift](#) from the estate of Elliott Zuckerman. Dr. Zuckerman, an accomplished painter, musician, poet, and tutor emeritus of St. John's College, made a gift through his estate to Touchstones Discussion Project of more than 180 of his original paintings. His wishes were for Touchstones to sell his paintings to support community discussion programs, teacher workshops and coaching, and new educational program development. So far, sales of Elliott's paintings have brought more than \$15,000 to Touchstones!

Elliott understood the importance of Planned Giving, as estate gifts help secure a non-profit's long-term financial health. Planned gifts can be any amount of money, appreciated securities, artwork, charitable lead trusts, IRAs, and life insurance policies. Gifts like these help Touchstones staff to provide teachers annually with class sets of our discussion programs and on-site training and coaching even when

school funding is scarce—a growing reality in the U.S. Estate gifts also ensure continuation of our free public programming for under-resourced groups and communities, including veterans, homeless adults and youth, detained youth, and incarcerated adults. In addition, legacy gifts provide funding to make new discussion program development possible—from early childhood education to specifically tailored programs throughout all stages of adulthood.

Planned Gifts can be made via a will, bequest, or trust and are among the most significant gifts a donor can make. They are a way to demonstrate one's support for an organization and mission in perpetuity. Touchstones began in 1984 and with your support of a legacy gift Touchstones will continue its important work for many more decades to come. Please feel free to contact us with questions or for more information. We want this opportunity to be as meaningful for you as it will be for the people whose lives will be transformed through your estate gift to Touchstones.



Elliott Zuckerman, *Plant & 2 Fruits*. 2001

## Bridging the Distance

*Stefanie Takacs, Executive Director*

Over the last five months, we've become more acutely aware of distance. The word enters our daily language more times and ways than we realize. There is physical distance and social distance, though we are advised against using the latter term by mental health experts because humans need social connection. Prolonged social isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness, alienation, worthlessness, and a lack of belonging.

When we shifted overnight from an office in which we work together in person to remote operations, we took an additional step to make sure we stayed connected—not only with each other but also with teachers, volunteers, and other members of the Touchstones family. In March, we launched a community discussion program online that runs every other Saturday morning from 11 AM to noon, ET. To date, we've held seven discussions with a total of 26 different participants—joining in from southern California to coastal Maine and across the Canadian border in Northumberland County, Ontario. Each discussion brings up to 15 participants. Some are regular attendees and others come in as schedules permit. Friends invite friends and the Touchstones circle grows.

So, too, do our skills as a group. Our discussions primarily focus on issues tied to civil society, with participants examining the Touchstones texts, their own experiences, and current events in a dynamic interplay. These are not easy topics to discuss: racism, equity, exclusion, compassion, trauma, courage, responsibility, selflessness, anger, sexism, and tolerance. But the group, meeting after meeting, works in earnest commitment to the Touchstones ideal that together we are better than we are alone. After our meetings, group members often tell us how important these discussions





are for them. “Thank you for the continued efforts you make to advance the mission of Touchstones in these challenging times,” wrote one participant. “To have the opportunity to share in the discussions we have explored recently is among the many gifts that have been afforded by this pandemic.” In return, we offer our thanks—to all who have been part of the community discussions so far and to those whose charitable support makes this work possible—and an invitation to everyone else to join us. You are welcome.

[Explore the Touchstones texts by clicking on the Student Guide here.](#)

## Recent Fiction as Navigating an Emerging and a Virtual World: A New Touchstones Discussion Program

*Howard Zeiderman, Touchstones Co-Founder & Director of Leadership Programs*

Since late spring, once a month 12 professionals—lawyers, CEOs, investors, entrepreneurs—sign onto a ZOOM meeting to spend 90 minutes together in a Touchstones discussion. Like all Touchstones programs, this virtual program uses selected texts—in this case recent short-fiction by writers such as Borges, Calvino, Handke, and Hazzard. These works function as tools, touchstones, to make our emerging world more visible. Undertaking this in a virtual form is a relatively new departure as we chart a course both by exploring these recent modes of fiction and engaging in authentic inquiry via a virtual platform.

Although we’ve piloted online programs in the past, we’ve affirmed this spring that our unique, decades-long and tested approach in the concrete Touchstones face-to-face experience translates richly and effectively into virtual discussions. These meetings equal both the intimacy and collaborative power of our traditional environment and, like explorations in person, create a venue for full and balanced participation with room for everyone’s talents and insights. One participant, a CEO from a major marketing corporation with prior experience running Touchstones groups said he was stunned at the extremely high level of engagement and in certain respects even preferred the virtual sessions. A successful entrepreneur from the Midwest who is also involved in internet marketing said he finds this Touchstones program an important vehicle for igniting his thinking and expanding his horizons. Participants come in from every time zone in the continental U.S., effortlessly overcoming geographic distance with remarkable ease and connecting meaningfully with others from diverse communities and professions.

Our foray into online executive programs began six years ago in piloting *Mapping the Future* with nine highly experienced Touchstones participants. *Mapping* serves as the backbone of our executive work because it develops a deepened and collaborative organizational culture. In that pilot, the group felt a virtual format offered many exciting possibilities, but issues of connectivity and bandwidth were problematic. High-speed access has improved significantly and new platforms such as Zoom offer tremendous adaptability.

In creating the new Touchstones custom program, we offered additional guidelines for online interaction: participants do *not* mute their microphones and the private chat tool is not allowed. Everything remains public and available to all—with few barriers to entry into the discussion. The use of breakout rooms enables small group work where teams of two to apply the Touchstones method to examine leadership issues. And polls, creatively designed, allow the group more detailed assessment of their dynamics. Even Touchstones speech maps can play a useful role, as they capture the flow and patterns in speaking. Although the current group has 12 participants, we’re considering expanding future group sizes to 18-20 participants.

We believe providing exceptional experiences in both in-person and virtual discussion programs strengthens our position as leaders in innovation and education. We will keep you current on these ground-breaking initiatives, as we seek opportunities to engage more leaders from around the country and the world in Touchstones.

### 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](#)