Discussions from the Inside Out: Bridging Our Disparate Worlds

Talk delivered at Princeton University, April 19, 2013. Howard Zeiderman

I am very pleased to be back in Princeton. However, I must also confess that in looking at the conference poster I feel quite out of my depth. I'm only occasionally involved with the incarcerated, whereas most others here today have devoted their lives to prison issues. My involvement with prisoners began in 1994, when a group of lifers at the Maryland House of Corrections invited me to join them in an exploration. They thought that the Touchstones® Discussion Project[1], a discussion-based program I designed for use in education, might diminish the arbitrariness of their own world. My work at the House lasted for three years. A few years later, it was closed for good. And as I had time to reflect on my experiences at the House, I wrote an article called, "Caged Explorers: The Hunger for Control," which was subsequently read by members of the organizing committee for this conference. They graciously decided I might have something to contribute today, and I hope my experiences will complement or reinforce some of your own activities and concerns.

My accidental connection with prisons occurred when I received a letter from an inmate named Marvin, who was serving life plus 30. He and some of his fellow prisoners had read a short text aloud from one of the Touchstones Student Editions. They had also followed the lesson plan in the accompanying Teacher's Guide and held a discussion on the text—a one-page excerpt from the account in the *Illiad* of King Priam's plea for the return of his son's dead body. In the discussion at the House, a small group of men serving life sentences for murder had been able— perhaps for the first time—to explore their own pasts through the mediating mirror of an unfamiliar and alien text. This text had been their touchstone.

The Touchstones Discussion Project format they followed is the same that I use with groups of CEOs. It is the same process that is also used by hundreds of thousands of undereducated adults and indentured children in Haiti, by would-be and actual college students in the United States and abroad, and by college faculties. Touchstones has been

[1] The Touchstones Discussion Project is a registered non-profit, based in Stevensville, Maryland. Touchstones programs now occur in more than 30 countries and the materials have been translated from English to French, Spanish, Haitian Kreyòl, Arabic, Burmese, and International sign language. More than 2,000,000 people have participated in Touchstones discussions since the Project began in 1984.

used by teachers in China, young adults in Gaza, the deaf in Jamaica, and the Ministry of Education in Jordan as part of their education reform. It has also been employed with government and private sector leaders in Tanzania, educators and community leaders in Burma, and, most relevant to our discussions today, by adults in prisons. But Touchstones is most widely used in K-12 schools as a tool to build critical and reflective thinking and communication skills in our future citizenry.

This first small group of men at the House did what all Touchstones groups do. They engage in an activity that some may call a seminar. The conventional rhetoric about seminars is that teacher-student engagement is different in this context—participants are supposedly on a more equal playing field and instruction occurs through dialogue. But in the seminars I attended as an undergraduate and graduate student and have since observed in countless environments and cultures, unfortunate and similar patterns emerge. In spite of the rhetoric about seminars, they are nearly always simply a disguised lecture. Whether explicitly or implicitly, all speaking is mediated by the center of power in the room: the teacher, the professor, the employer, the expert. The most senior person present—no matter how the group defines seniority—determines the legitimacy of speech. In addition, participation among the remainder of the group is imbalanced. Often it is very imbalanced. One will see displays of dominance, factions, intimidation, fear, misunderstanding, and passivity. Sometimes these are overt and sometimes they are more subtle. Such displays are often connected with race, gender, economic and social class, and perceived credentials.

That reality has always troubled me. I've spent most of my professional and personal life examining why it occurs irrespective of culture. For me, the question has been how to transform that phenomenon into an activity that is more fruitful and inclusive and less one that is crafted to enslave people and paralyze their thinking. In creating Touchstones, my design was specifically to overcome the deep-seated cultural, institutional, and ideological barriers that are obstacles to genuine discussion in which all voices are heard and all members learn to become simultaneously participant and leader. These are skills we all need—inside the prison and out.

In truth, when I received the letter from Marvin after his first Touchstones experience, I was too embarrassed to refuse his request. He asked if I would come in to

assist him and a group of prisoners to have discussions. Little did I know that this activity would become a mainstay in my life—that I would be in prison weekly for many years. That I would still be involved in programs in prison.

Marvin and his fellow inmates at the House were lifers who were housed in a large prison in which there was great freedom of movement. When there is movement in a prison, there are frequently collisions. And such contact often ends badly. Such was the world for these men. They eventually confided that they had three aims: to transform their environment, to gain greater credibility with the many young men who passed through that facility, and to think for themselves.

In the Touchstones' conception of a seminar, to participate means simultaneously to lead. The men wished to learn how to lead such groups and spread the program through the prison. It might, they hoped, humanize the environment, achieving their first goal of transforming their immediate world.

Their second aim—that of gaining credibility—was geared toward addressing younger prisoners' distorted thinking that they had entered a sort of community college. There, in prison, these neophytes expected to learn skills that would enable them in the future to avoid capture and incarceration. Marvin and his colleagues were more savvy about future possibilities. They thought if they could explore serious topics together and address their difficulties in speaking, listening and understanding, they would gain credibility within the prison. They hoped then their advice and warnings to the new prisoners entering the system—about the risk of spending a lifetime in prison—would be taken more seriously.

The last and probably most important goal for the prisoners in this group was a personal and more private desire: to free their minds and think for themselves. People in prisons live in the most arbitrary of all environments. They control nothing; even fundamental rules are constantly in flux. To satisfy their hunger for control, they may work out in the yard or work at controlling their peers. But in their first Touchstones discussion, these men recognized that they were able to do something different—they might become able to think their own thoughts.

Following the closure of the House, my work in prison started again a year later—this time at the Maryland Correctional Institute at Jessup. And for about the last 12 of

those years, it has been a blended group in which volunteers—people of every size, weight and shape and background—some of whom are prisoners and some who are not—come together from their two worlds each week. There, they translate themselves and their languages into a shared space.

The unexpected twist of introducing outside volunteers to the program came as a result of other Touchstones groups I was leading and continue to lead with CEOs. Currently, I run a custom program in NYC twice a month with an invitation-only group of 14 that meets for 90 minutes. They, like all Touchstones groups, are seeking something they find only through genuine discussion with others.

Back in the mid-1990s, I and two colleagues ran a similar program in Washington for eight years with elite government and industry leaders. One of the members was an Episcopalian deacon at Christ Church, Georgetown. The deacon, Rita Henninger-Steadman, had known about the Touchstones prison program at MCI-J, and she asked to go in with me. The next week, we watched a prisoner conduct an hour-long Touchstones discussion with 20 men. Afterward, Rita and I agreed to start a program where volunteers from the privileged world of the inner beltway would join with prisoner volunteers to chart unexplored terrain.

Rita's parishioners at Christ Church are among the most affluent, well-connected, and educated in the world. She recognized that even with all of the privilege—perhaps because of it—there was much missing within her parishioners. In the Touchstones prison program, Rita saw a chance for her flock to gain something themselves. Unlike in more traditional approaches to prison volunteerism in which the volunteers spread their faith, provide compassionate ears, or teach prisoners a traditional skill or trade, Rita and I agreed that would not be our approach. Instead of the volunteers going in to MCI-J to "do something" for the incarcerated, they would go in to join as equals with prisoner volunteers for 60 to 90 minutes in a Touchstones discussion. Their discussion would be multi-directional, each participant learning from the others.

Most Touchstones' sessions, or classes, are designed to run for about an hour. There is always a short and unfamiliar text that is read aloud, even when all present can read. In most Touchstones programs, there is no preparation for the participants. This is

intentional, as it increases the level of uncertainty while also leveling the terrain. The Touchstones text is never a newspaper article or something from current events. And while the selected texts maybe themselves be profound and significant, they are not chosen for those particular characteristics. Rather, Touchstones texts are imbedded in a discussion process and used as a tool. In this environment, there are no correct answers or even any landmarks. As a tool—a touchstone—the text serves deliberately as a distorting mirror through which one's deepest assumptions can finally become visible and explored. It also enables the participants to filter out their personal experiences and surrender the authority of their memories and experiences to attempt a joint exploration.

The session that Rita and I had watched used a passage from Malcolm X's autobiography. And, typical of most Touchstones sessions, after the passage was read aloud, the entire group completed a short worksheet eliciting their opinions and started them thinking about a given topic. In this case, possible betrayal by a friend.

That work is followed by small group work, where the participants discuss possible initiating questions for the discussion and they evaluate what their questions may or may not offer the group. In so doing, they start to become themseves leaders and taking responsibility.

Following small group work, the whole group comes back together in their large circle, and the discussion leader begins the discussion. It may last half-an-hour or longer. And it will carry no specific agenda to cover material but instead to explore the tension between our inherited ideas and those embodied in the text.

The discussion leader may be a volunteer, either from the outside or inside, provided he or she has experience and training specific to the program's goals. In the discussion that we watched, a prisoner led the session. At the end of a set period of time, the leader ends the discussion without closure or summary and moves the group into the final work of the session. For the remaining 10-15 minutes, the group analyzes their work in the discussion. The group assesses and evaluates the behaviors and engagement of the leader and themselves. They examine whether there was dominance, whether comments were understood, how the discussion evolved, whether there were factions, and whether their words and references to the texts were used productively or as weapons. This is the

program that is implemented in many cultures and that Rita and I saw that day at MCI-J. A shift in communication within and among the prisoners had occurred.

After launching this new program, Rita's volunteers and I would meet at a rural post office half a mile from MCIJ each Tuesday morning. Sometimes we were delayed in entering MCIJ but more often the bureaucracy relented, allowing us and our counterparts to converge as a group of twenty who spanned the entire social, economic, and educational spectrum.

That school room was bare except for 20 movable plastic chairs and a poster listing the Touchstones grounds rules. Together, an eighty-year old DC socialite hostess wearing delicate white gloves, men who believed—and well may have—run what we call the free world, and inner city Baltimore drug lords and small time buglars sat in a circle to discuss a short and unfamiliar text. For 90 minutes each week, they strove to create a form of speech capable of overcoming the Babel that otherwise isolated their disparate worlds.

I would be mischaracterizing the program if I said it wasn't difficult. In order for any set of people to communicate—to listen and speak—genuinely with one another, those people must undo thousands of years of cumulative cultural and institutional habits and expectations that thwart authentic understanding of one another. At first, the chasm that separates one person from others or one group from another seems unbridgeable. Certainly that seemed the case in the early days of this new prison program. At first in that prison school room, fear pervaded. Volunteers from outside the prison were nervous and worried about violence, as volunteers from inside feared embarrassment and judgment. It required great courage and persistence for these two groups to face their preconceptions and reformulate their understanding of themselves and each other.

They struggled, as did I, in trying to select the right tools and strike the right balance to set us on course. The first text I chose was a very short Touchstones text by Francis Bacon about revenge. This text usually encourages wide participation. While the text and the process helped to get us started, we were all very formulaic in our efforts. During an endless session with many false starts and too much silence, a large prisoner who had spoken twice without garnering any responses finally said, 'Seems like we've got nothing to say about gettin' even. I guess we're all saints here.' There was silence for

moment, but it was very quickly followed with laughter from the participants. For a moment, we had become a group. It was weeks before that laughter was translated into speech. But the laughter in response to what had been said revealed that we could recognize our commonalities beneath our apparent differences.

About six weeks later, we read a short piece from Chuang Tzu called “The Secret of Caring for Life.” It describes how a novice chef needs to sharpen his knife every year. The master chef, in comparison, never needs to sharpen his knife because he wields it to cut through the empty spaces between the bones and sinews. He possesses the secret of caring for life.

In the analysis and reflection following that discussion, the 80 year old DC socialite said, ‘We’re getting better, we actually made room for one another. It’s what I want to see at my dinners and social evenings but that never happens.’ A man sitting next to her, said, ‘It’s like in the story. At first we smashed into one another like that new chef. But today we talked in the spaces. And in prison unless you learn that, you don’t survive.’ While it was initially the volunteers’ willingness to go in to MCI-J that afforded the insiders and outsiders a chance at building something new, at that moment it was clear that roles were shifting. We had become one group with much to learn from one another.

Why undertake a discussion program that deliberately involves people from all backgrounds, professions, faiths, or non-faiths from inside and outside? What is to be gained? As we know, incarcerated people have many needs. Some cannot read, some are unable to speak publicly, some do not know how to listen. Many do not believe they are worthy of more than what life gave them at birth. They need assistance in many ways and from many people—from counselors, teachers, lawyers and other skilled professionals, and the religious. All of those forms of assistance come from outside of themselves. More is needed, and this is true for all humans.

In the prison, those who are incarcerated must first feel that they have some semblance of control in their lives in order significantly to undertake those steps wth other’s assistance. Without it, they are not only imprisoned, but they are once again made dependent or even enslaved. From the beginning, the lifers at the House knew more deeply what they needed: a sense of control and autonomy. And it was in their very

thinking that these were simultaneously possible. It is not something we could bestow on others nor what can occur through conventional modes of teaching or even friendship. Rather, it was a possibility offered through Touchstones because each participant is afforded a voice, respect as an equal, and full membership in an evolving group that will struggle together to overcome the deep barriers to both thinking and community. The activity of authentic and collaborative discussion enables people to more fully understand themselves and each other as part of a larger humanity.

More than several thousand prisoners and hundreds of volunteers have participated in Touchstones prison programs since it first started back in 1994. It has been called a lifeline by the prisoners themselves. By those who go in from the outside, it has been called a gift of understanding.

I should end with a short account of a revealing incident. One Tuesday not too long ago, I entered MCI-J clearly subdued and more than a little dejected. The group could see that I was down and they asked why. I had worked with another group—those who have every advantage available in the outside world—the entire previous weekend and felt it had been an abysmal two day session. Within that particular group, every participant has at least two extraordinary skills that underlie their enormous success: they make and execute very complex decisions superbly well, and they speak in ways such that they are always listened to. This is partly because everything they say is in the imperative mode; they speak in commands.

The other side of these remarkable abilities, as you might suspect, are equally remarkable defects. Most don't—perhaps they *can't*—question themselves in deep and meaningful ways. And they do not know how to listen. In weekend with them, I had been unable to move them to hear each other. And they had been unwilling to look at themselves objectively. This felt like failure to me and it troubled me greatly. I shared my experience with the participants in the prison program, and they responded. For among other extraordinary abilities and skills that the prisoners in the MCIJ group possess, they have great expertise both in questioning themselves and in listening carefully—the type of listening one must have to be safe in a dangerous and unpredictable place.

For that Tuesday in prison, we discussed my recent session with that other group. The prisoners offered advice and counsel on how to make progress with those who had

been so impervious. And their collaboration with one another and with the volunteers from the outside helped me to realize things I hadn't before. I have since followed some of their advice with other groups. And in reflecting on the prisoners' wisdom, I wonder if perhaps a bridge had been forged between their and our disparate worlds years earlier, fewer of them would be prisoners now.

I am a teacher. However, I don't go into prison to teach. I go into prison to join with a group of peers to explore issues and regions of thought that force us to recognize and overcome our assumptions about one another and ourselves. And in this act of collaboration we begin to shape a common world that we can all inhabit.