



This “thought sheet” is produced as a service of the L'Arche Canada Foundation to the Canadian public. We offer it as a contribution to the public conversation about values and the shaping of the social ethos in which we live. Our perspective comes from two broad sources: (1) from thirty-five years of living together in community as a diverse group of people, differently abled and from various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds; and (2) from contemporary thinkers who are open, fresh and responsive to the human spirit and are reflecting deeply on the individual and society today. Our goal in this publication is to strengthen the experience of human solidarity in Canada by making available some of this combined wisdom and reflection.

The vision and confidence to create a healthy Canadian society lies in the nexus where humanistic thinking and spirituality cross-fertilize. Indeed, today the best spiritual thinking engages contemporary culture with a view to the good of human society and the best humanistic thinking integrates spiritual values. We believe it is possible to live consciously in the gap between an ideal society and everyday reality and to make choices that contribute to the closing of that gap. It is a hopeful view, based on human and spiritual values embodied in daily life.

A Human Future

VOLUME 1 ■ NUMBER 1 ■ FEBRUARY 2002

Disappointment, Hope and Relationship with “the Other”

By *Beth Porter*

MICHAEL ADAMS, in his turn-of-the-year assessment of trends in Canadian Society (“*We’re hiding from the future,*” *The Globe and Mail*, Dec. 29, 2001) notes Canadians’ retreat from an expansive and optimistic vision of their future, a vision encompassing a trust in pluralism.

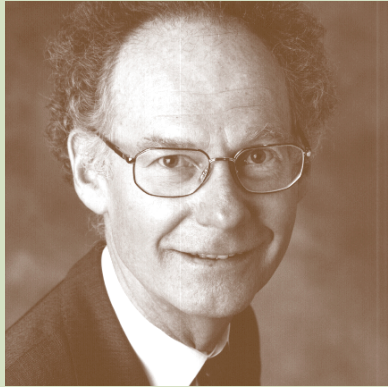
Contrasting Canada with the United States, he observes that while for the past two decades the United States has seen a backlash against complexity and a return to traditional values (harsher, more moralistic, and mistrustful of outsiders), “Canada seemed set on a course of gradual, organic social change; our society was diverse but in the broadest sense we were all heading in the same direction.” But in the past few years economic challenges and erosion in health care and social programs have contributed to a movement away from this position. Now, given new fears and security concerns, he raises important questions about where this movement may lead us.

Similarly, at a recent conference for people involved at all levels of social and health services, Jean Vanier noted the movement away from an appreciation of communal undertakings, characteristic of the ‘60s and ‘70s, to today’s tendency toward closed groups, often suspicious of other groups and harsh toward those who are fragile. “What does it mean to be human,” he asks, “in a dehumanizing society, where possessions take precedence over people?”

Many of us hoped that with the late 20th century advances in science and technology, there lay ahead a

What does it mean to be human in a society that has become hard toward those who are more fragile...?

Michael Adams



RICK CHARD

As fearful Canadians feel the need to 'Look out for No.1,' we have seen a decline in Canadians' interest in others and willingness to entertain different points of view. Whether it is Canada's poor, native Canadians on remote reserves, or Afghans, we are less willing to listen and empathize.... But there is another, more troubling side to Canadians' retreat – the fear and distrust of 'the Other' that comes from clustering the question becomes: What kind of security are we seeking? And where will our desire for control stop?

(excerpted from "We're hiding from the future,"
The Globe and Mail, December 29, 2001.)

MICHAEL ADAMS | *Environics*
President, researcher of trends in Canadian
society, best-selling author of *Sex in the Snow,*
and *Better Happy than Rich?*

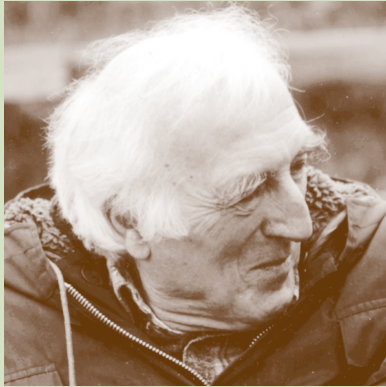
more relaxed, just, and civilized society. We are disappointed. We were already seeing, before September 11th, that economic globalization was not providing much increase in socio-economic well-being, either for the stressed middle class and growing underclass at home or for people in developing countries. Clearly, what had been achieved at this point was (to quote Canadian bio-ethicist and health care advocate Dr. Nuala Kenny) "not a global village but a highly competitive and inequitable global marketplace."

The immediate future of our society depends largely on how well we handle disappointment and fear, and on how we harness the creative energies that can result from these experiences. The danger is that we resign ourselves to the sense that our social vision is not realizable. As a society we can fall into a kind of cynicism and apathy. But disappointment and fear can also lead us to reflect upon our deepest desires as citizens and then to move forward in solidarity as a human family. If we work hard together, such a process can lead to a renewal of our moral imagination and release individual and communal energies to engage problems more deeply and discover hitherto unenvisioned paths into the future.

Massey lecturer Janice Gross Stein, Director of the University of Toronto's Munk Centre for International Studies, spoke last fall of our need to be "intellectually astute and committed to open dialogue – to find new ways of allowing openness." It makes sense to begin with an examination of the foundations of our society. Cracks have developed in the trust and generosity of spirit toward "the other" that are the underpinnings of Canadian society. What are the bricks and mortar needed to rebuild more strongly the weakened parts of the Canadian edifice? And where do we find the hope and energy for this work?

The "bricks" are surely the solid relationships that Canadians have always created with one another – social and economic, uni -and cross-cultural, based not on suspicion but on trust, and issuing in mutual cooperation. Many would agree

Jean Vanier



IRENE BORINS-ASH

My passion is to understand human transformation: How do people move from being closed up in fear or guilt or depression, to acceptance – to discovering and affirming their fundamental humanity? It has to do with truly meeting another.... The fundamental quality of human beings is to be in relationship.... It is in truly meeting the other that transformation starts. Here, individuals begin to discover what compassion really is and can come to rejoice in people and their differences.

(excerpted from “A Human Future: On Building a Compassionate Society,” conference transcripts)

JEAN VANIER | *internationally recognized spiritual leader, social activist, advocate for people who are marginalized, author of the best-selling books, Becoming Human, and Made for Happiness: Discovering the Meaning of Life with Aristotle.*

that the “mortar” in the foundation of Canadian society is the very spirit of openness of which Professor Stein speaks. Canadian openness is characterized by a willingness to listen and to see both sides of an issue, by an underlying desire for justice for all, by a capacity to find our way through differences. It is marked most of the time by reasonableness, moderation, compromise, and even kindness. A reminder of the value we as Canadians put on this “mortar” is the enormous love expressed recently for Peter Gzowski, often cited for his nurturing of our sense of connectedness, as a people spread from Newfoundland to British Columbia to the Arctic. Finally, the energy that this openness to the other engenders, springs not primarily from utopian ideas but from real, life-giving encounters in the present moment – encounters, in which we momentarily pass over into the other’s world and glimpse reality as they experience it. Such encounters infuse hope. They help us regain an appreciation of our diversity, re-imagine our world, and access anew the courage to risk and stretch out towards it.

A small pamphlet appeared recently in which was printed the golden rule as expressed in the texts of thirteen different religions, along with simple suggestions for reaching out in friendship to someone who is different: the “Hello connection,” the “Coffee connection,” the “Lunch connection.” Sometimes it is the basic needs of an utterly non-threatening person that can provide the occasion of meeting. One evening earlier this month in a Canadian suburb, some forty Muslims, Christians, and Jews gathered to mark the move of a petite Muslim woman with a developmental disability (she is able



MARCY MIKANIAN

A SIGN OF HOPE

These friends share life together in a L’Arche community in Canada. They are Christian, Jewish, Muslim and agnostic; some have intellectual disabilities, some have university degrees.

neither to walk nor talk nor see), from one home into another where she will have more opportunities. Those present celebrated her for all she teaches them of perseverance and joyfulness, and they stayed long after the program to chat and plan further encounters. Finding the “new ways” of which Janice Stein speaks, ways that will strengthen Canadian society, will entail both critical reflection and a mindful reaching out in efforts to meet and understand the person who is different. It’s an intellectual work that we are called to, but fundamentally it involves taking risks and moving beyond our comfort zone. If we eschew critical reflection we can easily be caught up in the tide of events that impinge from beyond. If we don’t take the most basic personal risks, getting to know the immigrant neighbour down the street or the marginal person in our office, what we most cherish about Canada may continue to erode.

The L’Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 121 communities of L’Arche on five continents, 26 in Canada. In L’Arche, people with developmental disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.



If you would like to receive this bi-monthly publication at no cost, please contact us indicating how you would like to receive it: e-mail or fax.

Email: LarcheCanFoundation@rogers.com

Tel: 416-566-4256

Fax 905-884-0580

11339 Yonge Street

Richmond Hill, ON L4S 1L1

A CLOSING COMMENT

In last fall’s Massey Lectures, Janice Stein urged that we be attentive to how we choose “the terms of living in relative security with diversity at home.” On a personal level, this could mean committing to a principle of finding mutuality in relationships with people who are different, thus opening oneself to new perspectives.

SOME QUESTIONS

What are the terms Canadians need to preserve or adopt for living together in a healthy society? How are you drawn to live these out in your personal life and in the public sphere? Could you engage someone this week in a discussion of this question? Or could you have a conversation with someone who is “the other” for you?

FOR YOUR INTEREST

- CBC “Ideas:” Jean Vanier and Nuala Kenny “A Human Future: On Building a Compassionate Society” Feb. 26, 9:00 – 10:00 p.m. (Transcript or CD available through CBC: <http://radio.cbc.ca/programs/ideas/transcripts/index.html> tel: 416-205-6010)
- Janice Gross Stein: *The Cult of Efficiency*, (Anansi, 2001)
- Michael Adams: <http://erg.environics.net/news/default.asp?alD=485>
- Michael Learner: *Spirit Matters*, (Hampton Roads Publishing Company, Inc., 2000)
- Jean Vanier: *Becoming Human* (Anansi, 1999)
- International Arts, Letters and Ideas website: www.aldaily.com
- LA Times on the arts after 9/11: <http://www.latimes.com/templates/misc/printstory.jsp?slug=la%2D123101art>

The mission of the L’Arche Canada Foundation is to encourage financial support of L’Arche and to help create a human future for Canadians.