



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 3 | NOVEMBER 2002

Radical Gratitude by Mary Jo Leddy A Review



Canadian social activist Dr. Mary Jo Leddy lives in and leads the Romero House community for refugees, which she helped found in 1990. She teaches theology at Regis College, in the University of Toronto’s School of Theology, and has written several other books including *At the Border Called Hope*.

A Human Future seeks to bring together some of the best humanistic and spiritual thought in ways that contribute to building a compassionate Canadian society. Feedback on our last issue, on health care, led us to think about the point of origin for systemic transformation, and that has led us to review *Radical Gratitude*, a timely new book by Mary Jo Leddy. The book does not attempt to offer a comprehensive model for societal renewal, but to provide a fresh and accessible starting point outside familiar political and economic thought structures.

Highly readable, Dr. Leddy’s writing is deeply in touch with North American culture. She intelligently deconstructs today’s socio-economic milieu and identifies its psychological effects. In response, convinced that it is human beings who shape and can change economics, she offers what she calls “habits of being” that can lead to inner liberation and to accessing energy and creativity for change. At the very heart of these habits, she recommends the habit of “radical gratitude” – by which she means not the mere counting of one’s blessings, but a foundational gratitude that wells up when we become conscious of the gift of life itself. This gratitude can lead to the liberating realization that “I am enough, I’m good enough, and I have enough.” And it can impart a sense of power not as domination and possession, but as the creative energy of the universe – enabling new choices.

To help us grasp what she means by gratitude, Leddy relates stories of people in grave circumstances who found

Susan J. Matt



A Contradiction at the Heart of Modern Capitalism

Matt shows the vital link between a consumer economy and the twin convictions that life's chief object is personal happiness and that consumers "can turn themselves into who they long to be" by getting and spending. And in doing so she illuminates an unresolved contradiction at the heart of modern capitalism: the very values it produces are at war with the values – industry, sobriety, moderation, self-discipline, and avoidance of debt – that built it and that are necessary for its long-term survival.

Excerpted from a review by Benjamin Schwartz of Susan J. Matt's new book, *Keeping Up with the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890-1930* (University of Pennsylvania Press), in *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 2002.



themselves caught up in amazement at the mere fact of being, and were changed by this experience. Besides pivotal moments in the lives of Albert Camus, Etty Hillesum and others, she recounts her own narrow escape when a fire engine ran over her car, and the generous response of a passerby that seemed a sign from Heaven. Such experiences often occur in the face of life's extremities – birth and death. They awaken a sense of mystery, and in the religiously inclined, a sense of the eternal or of the economy of grace, where what is most precious is freely given.

But there is much that prevents us today from coming in touch with such experiences. In past decades, "the modern myth of progress carried our lives forward by the sheer force of optimism.... The point of life [was] to better yourself and to make a better world." Biblical values still inspired people with a sense of responsibility for the wider society. Today the vision of a better future is fading – people live for the immediate. Leddy's book is worth reading if just for its analysis of what she calls "America, the North and the West" (of which Canada is a part) – "an empire in decline," she suggests. In today's culture, money dominates and humanistic values are trumped by overriding self-interest. "Consumerism has become the modern secular version of meaning. Consumer confidence has become the new economic indicator of hope."

Our culture seeks to persuade us that a consumer-driven economy will lead to a better world. In countless ways it promotes our "need" for ever more and better goods, services, or whatever else can possibly be marketed. It encourages a state of constant craving and dissatisfaction that becomes so familiar that we are scarcely aware of it. Even the hunger for justice can manifest in an unhappy craving that cannot produce lasting social change.

Leddy believes that this inner dissatisfaction expands until it eventually "implodes" in a profound dissatisfaction with oneself – "I am not enough" – and in an accompanying guilt. Often

Margaret Visser



For more than two thousand years we have fought for freedom from fate, and in many ways we have attained it. However, we seem, in important respects, now to be letting that freedom slip from our grasp. Fatalism and submission to chance, within modernity itself, is at present gaining ground.....

Escape from fatalism and its twin warders, boredom and embarrassment, begins simply with consciousness – with paying attention....

There is an abyss between knowing what one should do and actually doing it. This divide can be crossed only by each person, personally. The step is made in freedom: it is always possible to know what to do and not do it. Willingness is involved, just as openness and readiness are requirements for insight, or indeed for any spiritual experience. All of the stages imply conversion, especially conversion of the will.

From *Beyond Fate* (the 2002 CBC Massey Lectures),
by Margaret Visser, (Toronto: Anansi).



isolated, demoralized by bureaucratic systems, and diverted by superficial entertainments, people are likely to be tempted by the resentment that springs of powerlessness, and unlikely to question the corporate agenda they have internalized.

But the economic system works only as long as people “want to think that freedom has to do with the range of choices available to the shopper,” explains Leddy. Her book will help readers think further.

In an incisive analysis of popular liberal and conservative solutions to contemporary problems, she reveals their inadequacy, drawn as they are from the very systems of decline they seek to renew. The conservative effort to legislate personal morality and impose social cohesion must depend on the coercive, not the creative use of power. Liberalism, valuing pluralism but lacking a unifying social vision, flounders without a decision-making base other than self-interest, when confronted by shrinking economic resources. “A few significant words are noticeably absent from the liberal vocabulary today,” she adds, “words like sacrifice and commitment.”

Pointing out that all great religions have recommended practices that enable people to live by what inspires them, Leddy’s final chapter offers ten “habits of being” with the potential to transform our lives. Besides radical gratitude she urges, for instance, a habit she terms, “Begin before you are ready.” By this she means seize the split second of insight to begin to act. “It is only our cultural illusions that dictate that we should wait for the perfect moment.”

Leddy’s broad scholarly background is unobtrusively present in a set of fascinating notes and suggestions for further reading. In these she reveals connections she perceives among some of the West’s seminal thinkers, from Hannah Arendt to Rene Girard, Nietzsche and Scheler to Michael Lerner and Linda McQuaig. Leddy’s social analysis does not rely on religious concepts, but when she proposes a way forward she often

uses Christian imagery, and she includes several quite beautiful poetic prayers. They come as a surprise in a text that speaks primarily to the intellect, but for those who do not skip past them they may evoke the very kind of experience of wonder which Leddy recommends. The book's Christian framework may, unfortunately, limit its readership. However, Dr. Leddy clearly has profound respect for the world's great religions, and her ideas should attract readers of any theistic tradition.

Radical Gratitude is published by Maryknoll, a Catholic organization known for books of quality that raise social justice issues. It is written primarily for educated middle class and mainstream religious people, a group "at the forefront of most developments in spirituality." Today, she notes, "all too often middle-class people tend to think of liberation in psychological or spiritual terms or become involved in issues of social justice out of guilt rather than gratitude." *Radical Gratitude* offers a fresh, hope-filled path that can renew the moral imagination and perhaps lead to genuine change. It deserves careful reading and reflection.

– reviewed by Beth Porter



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.

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SOME FEEDBACK ON A HUMAN FUTURE

**"Challenging!" "Thought-provoking!"
"Needed!" "Well-designed!" "Please
include a space for comments."**

And Questions:

**1. How can we think outside the box so we can actually bring about change? S.B.
ed: We think Mary Jo Leddy's new book,
Radical Gratitude, offers some answers.**

**2. Are not Health Care Co-ops just another form of two-tier health care? B.R.
ed: The following explanation is from
Brenda Heald of the Canadian
Cooperative Association:**

Health care co-operatives that provide a full range of health services (such as clinics) are fully integrated into the single tier publicly funded health care system. In most of Canada, emerging health areas such as home care are in a two-tiered system regardless of whether the services are provided through a co-operative or more traditional models. Health co-ops usually waive the membership fee for low-income individuals/families.

Please send us your thoughts and questions about this issue of *A Human Future*.

FOR YOUR INTEREST

- Social, Economic and Political Change, a website with many links, supported by the International Consortium for the Advancement of Academic Publication: <http://gsociology.icaap.org/>
- *Beyond Fate*, by Margaret Visser, Toronto: Anansi, 2002
- "Some Implications of the Word 'Culture,'" by Margaret Visser, Centre Point, No. 9, Winter, 2001 (newsletter of the Centre for Cultural Renewal: <http://www.culturalrenewal.ca/>)
- *Radical Gratitude* by Mary Jo Leddy, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002.

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.