



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

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Renewing Democracy: Is there Hope?

by Miriam Wyman



Miriam Wyman coordinated Canada’s contribution to the Commonwealth Foundation’s *Civil Society in the New Millennium Project*, contributed to the *From Venting to Inventing* study, and is a member of the Foundation’s *Citizens and Governance Programme* team. She is a researcher, writer, facilitator and developer of consultative processes to strengthen citizens’ voices in decisions that affect them.

In L’Arche, we believe people need the sense of belonging to one another and the wider society gleaned from being able to contribute to decisions that affect us. This empowerment happens in a house meeting, where people may decide together such daily issues as who takes out the compost, and also happens when L’Arche people can contribute to social services policy.

In A Human Future we promote dialogue about what makes for a healthy society, a society where people feel heard and give generously of themselves because they have a sense of ownership. We are grateful to Miriam Wyman, a friend of L’Arche with broad experience of helping build a society where people can contribute to decision making, who has written a thought-provoking and timely article. May we accept the challenge to grow in our participation as we approach upcoming elections! – Editor.

“WHERE ARE CITIZENS’ VOICES REALLY HEARD? Are democratic processes still working for Canadians? Is government accountable?”

These are major questions today. They seem to be more pressing now, when millions of people know that war is no way to make peace, and do not feel heard. For me, confusion is becoming a state of being.

I write as a woman, mother and grandmother with a huge stake in a peaceful and secure future. I write as a feminist, environmentalist and Jew. I was raised by parents who believed that we are responsible for helping to fix the world, that we are connected to what came before and what comes after, and who acted accordingly. In my home, there was not a big sense of having power in the wider world; there was, though, a big commitment to engage the world in meaningful ways. When I was young,



Michael Lerner



Energy always flows either toward hope, community, love, generosity, mutual recognition, and spiritual aliveness or it flows toward despair, cynicism, fear that there is not enough, paranoia about the intentions of others, and a desire to control and to turn everything in our reality into something that can be controlled.

When people are hopeful, they believe that it is safe to stand up for a world based on caring and love, on goodness and generosity. They are willing to make sacrifices, give things up, pay higher taxes, give time and energy to social movements, trust in the possibility of peace and mutual reconciliation, and imagine that the world's resources could be shared in a fair way and that we could together protect the environment.

Editorial, *Tikkun*, March/April 2001

Michael Lerner is a Rabbi of the Jewish Renewal Movement and Editor of *Tikkun* magazine.

www.tikkun.org

this meant providing food and funds to those who needed it more than we did, struggling to locate relatives who survived the Holocaust and helping them come to Canada and find jobs, working against anti-Semitism, and placing enormous value on education. It meant doing what was needed even when that was hard, painful and costly.

I work to bring people's voices into decisions that affect their lives and communities. I first became involved with environmental issues in the 70s. Now, decades after Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, people are finally beginning to understand that everything is connected to everything else, and that if we poison our environment, we also will be poisoned. It is taking even longer to learn that this truth applies to our social, cultural, economic and political environments too.

Around the world, it is women who are the leaders in the environment movement. We are its heart and backbone. Women are the ones who continue to figure out how to bring people together to talk about what really matters to them, and how to bring these conversations into public policy processes. We are willing to challenge authority (often because we have little to lose), we understand the power of anger combined with action, and our motivation is more often communal than corporate. In *Sweeping the Earth*, I wrote: "All over this world – there is a groundswell of indomitable, persistent, committed, untiring women who struggle to make this a healthier place." Only a few years later, this groundswell has become an enormous grassroots social movement. Everywhere women and men (young and old) are thinking and talking about environment, justice, and equity. At the third World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in January 2003, more than 100,000 people met under the banner "Another World is Possible." Porto Alegre itself is a symbol of hope because of its participatory budgeting process, involving tens of thousands of its citizens. Gatherings like the World Social Forum, which is generating smaller social forums all over the world, highlight the contra-

Jean Vanier



RENE BORINS ASH

If community members are open to those who are different, inside and outside the community, they become a sign and source of peace. As they come together and give each other support, they welcome people and accomplish things they could not do alone. They can confront difficulties and walk bravely through the fear and pain of life. When community is lived fully and authentically, when members are united and prepared to work through the conflicts inherent in all groups of people, when they are seeking to grow in their mission of compassion to those in need, the community can become a sign of our collective potential....

Jean Vanier: *Finding Peace*, (Toronto: Anansi, 2003). Jean Vanier is founder of L'Arche and is internationally recognized as a social visionary and spokesperson for all who are marginalized. He is a Companion of the Order of Canada and has received numerous humanitarian awards.



diction between people's desire to be involved in decisions that affect them and the trend of governments towards increasingly centralized decision-making. In a recent Canadian study, we hoped to find that where citizens are active, democracy is strong. Unfortunately this was not the case. In fact, democracy can be weak even when citizens are doing "all the right things."

It should be no surprise that citizens want to be involved in decisions that affect their lives, their communities and, indeed, the world, at the very time that there are fewer legitimate avenues for them to contribute. Instead, we see growing protests, an expression of deep frustration. Discouragement with normal democratic processes leads citizens to find their voice outside traditional politics. Grassroots successes like Porto Alegre, huge protests at international meetings of government leaders and alarming drops in voter turnout (the worst ever, in Canada's last federal election) present a stark picture of the gulf between citizens and their governments. People, particularly young people, are giving up on democracy as it is currently practiced. This should give us enormous pause.

How do we address the chasm between people and their governments? As a person passionate about promoting good governance and public policy that is truly citizen-centered, I am deeply convinced that we need some system of mandatory listening – some way to build citizens' concerns into our government decision-making institutions. Structural change is very slow, and there is not (yet) universal recognition of the value that ordinary people can bring to government decisions. There are, however, some glimmers of hope. The creation of Nunavut is a brilliant example of citizens' persistent, committed dedication to a cause that eventually drew broad political support. However, the process took thirty years!

One current bright light is the new Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue. The Code, agreed to in October 2002, builds on the 2001 Accord between the Government of

Canada and the Voluntary Sector, and sets out good practices, intended to strengthen policy dialogue between the federal government and the voluntary sector for the express purpose of developing better public policy. It recognizes that the voluntary sector has valuable experience and expertise to contribute. This Code is central to the change in culture that is needed within government and, when fully implemented, should certainly help to strengthen democracy.

For those who work to democratize decision-making, the road is long, and temptations to apathy or cynicism – not to mention exhaustion – lurk along its margins. Sources of strength and inspiration are important. I am deeply grateful to my friend and mentor Bella Abzug, who taught me to never work alone, that politics without love is hollow, that being diplomatic means being effective, not charming, and to never, never, never give up. And I often think of a Talmudic saying, “It is not for you to complete the task, but neither is it for you to desist from it” – in my words, we don’t have to do everything, but we do have to get started!

A Human Future is edited 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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SUGGESTIONS

Elections are coming –

- Get informed – pick one issue that interests you and learn about its many aspects. Talk about it with your friends – talk politics! Write your elected representatives. Let us know your issue. We will list some of them in our next *A Human Future*.
- Read *From Venting to Inventing* : www.democracyeducation.net and click on “Publications.”
- Try looking at alternative media such as: www.straightgoods.com, or www.rabble.ca.
- Even if you don't like protests, try to find out what the issues are behind them.
- Talk to the candidates. Ask for their positions on issues that matter to you. Ask them specifically what they do to find out how citizens feel about issues. And ask them what they do with that information.
- Encourage everyone you know, especially young people in your life, to vote.

FOR YOUR INTEREST

- Miriam Wyman, ed., *Sweeping the Earth: Women Taking Action for a Healthy Planet*, Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press and Women's Press, 1999. (Thirty-five stories of women in 11 countries).
- Douglas V. Porpora: *Landscapes of the Soul: The Loss of Moral Meaning in American Life*, Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Canadian Policy Research Networks, home of “The Society We Want” project: www.cprn.org/
- The Accord between Government of Canada and Voluntary Sector: www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/announcements.cfm/eng/announcements.cfm.
- The Code of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue: www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/joint_tables/accord/codes_policy.cfm.
- The World Social Forum and Social Forums in Canada: www.worldsocialforum.com; Canadian ecumenical site: www.kairoscanada.org/english/programme/WSF; Also see: www.torontosocialforum.ca

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.