



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.

JERRY BAUER



David Adams Richards

has won the Governor General’s Award for both fiction and non-fiction. Several of his novels have been adapted for film. His concerns include “the complex moral and spiritual dimensions of power and violence and his characters’ personal responses to instances of inhumanity” (Margo Wheaton, *Antigonish Review*). His newest novel is *River of the Brokenhearted*, due out in August.

A Human Future

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The Arts and Society: “Reminding us of what it is to be truly human.”

by David Adams Richards

Winner of the 2000 Giller Prize for *Mercy Among the Children*, (Doubleday Canada)

The health of any society is reflected in the vibrancy and depth of its artistic expression. For this issue we asked acclaimed Canadian author David Adams Richards to reflect on his experience as a writer. Richards emphasizes that great literature springs from what is authentically the writer’s own, unrelated to intellectual or social fads. And it ultimately will convey something about the nature of love and human life itself.

As well, the much-read spiritual writer Henri Nouwen reflects on teaching van Gogh and being led, with his students, into the depths of the soul. The selection from Sandra Bryant Miller may challenge us to embrace what we think is a healthy tension between excellence and the democratic impulse to accept all creative expression, regardless of artistic merit. In L’Arche, we seek to foster inclusion in all that we do, and we also believe that it is honouring to empower individuals to produce work of the highest quality, whether this work is a performance, a liturgy, or a woven tablecloth or hand-crafted candle.

– Beth Porter, Editor.

ART IN SOCIETY, AND THE ARTISTS THEMSELVES have a special place, Thomas Merton said. No, they are not saints – some of them far from it, but still, the best of them, the ones that remain, show us one thing brilliantly and utterly: that life exists for and within the core of human love. And that, and that alone – human love – becomes the glue for the longevity of true art.

I think I have always been aware of why I write, and Who allows me to. (An unpopular assertion, I guarantee.)

Sarah Bryant Miller



Pop vocalists pose as opera singers. Important art museums exhibit installations that the cleaning staff mistakes for trash. Obscenity-riddled recitations, imposed over rhythm tracks, are reckoned to be music.

Criticize these bad jokes and you are likely to find yourself anathematized as “elitist”.... [But] when did having standards and expertise become a bad thing?

The democratic impulse is at odds with the idea of an elite, and for [decades now] the charge of elitism has been an all-purpose invective. Unfortunately, this skepticism has metamorphosed over the years into a determination that no one with special knowledge or experience is worth listening to.... But whether the product is Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee or grand opera, a little knowledge can lead to a far more satisfying experience.

In every kind of performance, whether of high art or high camp, informed opinion is the enemy of empty pretense.... A few hours invested in understanding what one is to see or hear at a performance can yield rewarding results.

Excerpted from a review by Sarah Bryant Miller, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* Classical Music Critic, April 4, 2003.



That is, I believe in the vocation, not the occupation.

I have written eighteen books, most of which have been published, and some of which are well known. At first, there was a general applause for my work within the literary Maritimes, and sooner than later, in the larger literary community of Canada. For a while, I was sought out by people who thought and lived very unlike myself. My early popularity came because I was writing about “poor people,” “backward places,” which is always a concern of those seeking social justice. Many of these early followers were certain they knew what social justice was by adopting the slogans and soft rhetoric that had become fashionable in the 70s. However, I soon saw that often they had no idea of minorities or First Nations people. For a while they assumed my wonderful novel was to come, where I would say all the right things, about the triumph, not of the human spirit but of the kind of spirit these early friends promoted as the right kind of spirit to have. They were upset that I did not allow my characters to win (that is, with a job and security). They do win in a different way, of course.

The triumphs of my characters' world were not so much physical or social but spiritual. My work was telling the world, or clumsily trying to, that people were only as great as their

THE SPIRIT MOVERS

The Spirit Movers, an interfaith dance company choreograph their own stories of the human spirit to allow each member to express his or her gifts. They are based at L'Arche in Richmond Hill, Ontario. (kkelly@istar.ca)



MANFRED BUEHNER, BUEHNERCREATIVE



Henri J.M. Nouwen



PETER DOLL

While I was at Yale Divinity School, I taught several seminars on Vincent van Gogh. I have never found students more personally, intellectually, and emotionally involved than they were during periods of attentive looking at Vincent's [works]. I didn't try to explain much.... Although the many psychological interpretations of his work opened my eyes to the significant connections between his personal life and his drawings and paintings, I have always sensed that there was something to be understood that went far beyond the level of psychodynamics.... I wanted the students to have a direct experience of the ecstasy and the agony of this painter who shared his desperate search for meaning....

We were all touched in places that no spiritual writer had been able to reach. A similar effect resulted from [reading] Vincent's letters. Their haunting, passionate expression of longing for a God who truly cares for the poor and the suffering brought us in touch with the deepest yearnings of our soul.

Henri J. M. Nouwen, Excerpted from the Foreword to *Van Gogh and God*, by Cliff Edwards (Chicago: Loyola University Press: 1989).

spirit – that justice came from sacrifice. None of my best characters had joined the modern revolutions but had resisted them.

Thousands of books are published each year to last only as long as that year. In the business, it's called a short shelf-life. Most publishers depend on short shelf-life books. These books are generally not taken too seriously as art. But in some cases, such a book is thought of as a true masterpiece because some television personage agrees with its point of view and promotes the book.

Applause is generally given in a society for its prevalent views rehashed in books as fact by people who believe that these views are their own original ones. But these books are forgettable within a given length of time. Why? Simply because it was not the writer alone speaking. He had everyone else with him, and so what he gave to the world wasn't his to give. This to me is the first rule of writing, and any good writer or critic can catch it: What a good writer gives is something that is his or hers – a very personal understanding, not some generally popular opinion.

Since my character Madonna in *The Bay of Love and Sorrows* fought a thug to the death to protect both her brother and a former love who betrayed her, she was called 'a loser' and



PATRICIA VICKERS

Patricia Vickers is a highly skilled appliqué artist of British and Tsimshian ancestry. Belief in transformation and the human capacity for positive change is part of Northwest Coast mythology and inspires her art, which adheres to First Nations cultural protocol. Patricia resides in British Columbia.

<http://www.ravenscall.bc.ca/applique/>

BYRON A. SMITH



recently, in a well-known magazine, “White Trash” – a term given freely to my characters by very socially committed individuals who on the one hand would be appalled at a racial slur, and on the other would never put themselves in physical danger over anything they themselves espoused. I believe that the dignity and love of my characters is sorely required in an age where greatness can be dismissed so glibly.

Over time, what is true and untrue is decided not by the writer or the publisher, or the best comments of a book club, but by some indefinable aspect that is often not seen immediately. Books initially forgotten come back. Great writing lasts and no critic or prize will help it or hinder it in the final analysis.

I am certain that the books which have lasted from a century and more ago contribute something to the greater good of humankind, and must exist because they help humankind, as Faulkner said, ‘endure.’ They do not instruct us so much as remind us of what it is to be truly human – and what we should do to remain human. All great books from Swift to Toni Morrison do this. They could do nothing less!



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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FOR REFLECTION

Each human being has the eternal duty of transforming what is hard and brutal into a subtle and tender offering, what is crude into refinement, what is ugly into beauty, ignorance into knowledge, confrontation into collaboration, thereby rediscovering the child's dream of a creative reality incessantly renewed by death, the servant of life, and by life the servant of love. Yehudi Menuhin

COMMENTS

- “Your last issue, on ‘Renewing Democracy,’ has led me to pay more attention to political reporting.”
- “Your thought sheet makes me think and remain hopeful that dialogue and discussion, among many people and with great thinkers, is taking place. In the past six months, my own feminist workplace has fired three women because each tried to use a democratic process to challenge oppressive policies.”

FOR YOUR INTEREST

- CBC ARTSCANADA: <http://artscanada.cbc.ca/artscanada.jsp>
Go to “Features” for a Canadian art exhibit titled, “The Art of Compassion,” a world music series, and other events.
- The Canada Council for the Arts: <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/>
Also: http://www.canadacouncil.ca/council/annualreports/2001-2002/AR2002_04-e.asp In 2001-2002, the Council gave grants, payments and awards totalling \$137 million to over 20,000 artists, arts organizations and authors.
- Canadian Poets list with links to selected poems:
http://www.library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry/index_poet.htm
- Alden Nowlan, Canadian poet: <http://www.unb.ca/qwerte/nowlan/>
(Click on “Poems” to hear Nowlan reading selections.)
- *Art and Society*, A UNESCO Publication, (1999),
7 place de Fonteney, 75700 Paris, FRANCE

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.