



A Human Future

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L'Arche Canada offers this "thought sheet" 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.

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.

Altruism: Part Two

An Interview with Dr. Pamela Cushing



Pamela Cushing is a cultural anthropologist. Her research includes health and disability studies, social inclusion, the politics of difference, and experiential education. She did post-doctoral research with Camphill Schools in Scotland and has done research with numerous other organizations (CACL, Roeher Institute, L'Arche, Laidlaw, Templeton and McConnell Family Foundations). She grew up in Montreal, and has lived in Europe, the U.S.A., and Togo. She and her husband, Jay, and their young son live in London, ON, where she teaches at King's College, University of Western Ontario.

This issue explores the theme of altruism with particular reference to L'Arche as a kind of laboratory for what we might learn about it. L'Arche is built on the altruism or generosity of the many young volunteers who come as assistants to share life with people with developmental disabilities in its homes and programs. These young people accept a lifestyle that is radically different from their peers who are not in L'Arche. They come for a year, or two, and some stay much longer. What motivates and sustains this kind of generosity?

A Human Future, is a free e-publication. We invite you to read back issues or to subscribe at www.larche.ca. Beth Porter, ed.

Beth Porter – For your PhD research you interviewed over 100 L'Arche assistants across Canada. What did you learn about altruism from them?

Pamela Cushing – I anticipated that many assistants would name altruistic motives as the reason they came to L'Arche. In fact, most of them were uncomfortable with the term "altruism" and even strenuously corrected me, saying in various ways, 'actually, for me this is not about sacrifice. It's about living a full life.' I was struck by their thinking that if they got something positive out of the experience, this cancelled the altruism in their initial motive. A massive American study done by sociologist Robert Wuthnow suggests this

"There are those little moments where you can decide to do the bare minimum or you can decide to do more..."



Anne Sagar



This year, my Grade 10 Civics class participated in The Toskan Foundation Youth and Philanthropy Initiative. Through it, students discover for themselves needs in our local community, and learn about issues they might only hear of on the news. It dispels the notion that people who need help are only in other parts of the world.

Initially, students are just concerned with winning (and having bragging rights for) the \$5,000 to give to their charity – the prize which Toskan offers for the best presentation. That attitude changes suddenly when students make site visits and see the hard work of their charity. The impersonal becomes personal. By the end of the project, their presentations are full of passion and desire to help others in need.

The biggest change comes with their final project, when they research human rights abuses around the world and make recommendations to stop them. The students now see the parallels in their local communities. The passion my students show to stop such abuses goes beyond the classroom. They want to change the world! This experience opens their eyes.

Anne Sagar teaches History and French at Pierre Elliott Trudeau High School in Markham, Ontario.

Toskan Foundation: www.toskanfoundation.com/

pattern may be true of our culture in general.

He found even people who gave significant time to volunteering were highly reticent about making altruistic claims, preferring to attribute their actions to personal satisfaction or happenstance. I think there's danger in negating altruism as part of their motives. Pure altruism is rather rare.

I discovered a blend of motivating elements in each assistant's story: 1) an altruistic impulse; 2) self-interest – an expectation of growing and learning by giving of themselves, or an expectation of adventure through living in a different country and with new people; and 3) a pragmatic element – coming to L'Arche made sense at the time. These motives didn't usually function as discreet variables but worked in concert.

One assistant said he saw L'Arche as a practical setting in which he could embody what he believed from his faith and his studies but had not been able to live out in a university setting. He saw 'doing good' – being altruistic – as part of his identity, and being a L'Arche assistant gave him a context to live this identity. Another assistant had been involved in community service but then went through a period of what she called "chaotic, destructive self-indulgence." She said, "I felt L'Arche could be the moral compass I needed." It could help her return to the person that she wanted to be, which included serving others. In both these stories self-interest and altruism are in a productive tension, the fruit of which can be healthy service in a context where the caregiver's awareness of what is being received enhances the dignity of the service.

What discourages altruism among young people?

Indifference, and cynicism. When young people are recognized and rewarded in an interpersonal, social way, not just by adults but by their peers, for other knowledge and other experiences, that dampens their desire to be part of social change. If everyone in your Facebook network is discussing the best songs, latest parties, and blogs, you are not going to get much recognition for trying to talk about your latest volunteer venture.



Natalle Chan & Wing Hei Lam



Another project...another burden! We certainly didn't know how much we would learn from participating in the Youth and Philanthropy Initiative. From choosing a grassroots charity, researching our topic – women's shelters – actually visiting the site (in the middle of a snowstorm), interviewing an administrator, and then preparing a presentation, we gained a better understanding of the world around us. We were impressed by the staff and touched by the stories of the victims. We didn't win the \$5,000 grant for our charity, but we won in other ways, because of all we learned. – Natalle and Wing Hei

"I used to think most people lived fairly comfortably, but this experience showed me a harsher reality. Not only our visit to the shelter, but also presentations of my classmates made me realize that plenty of people are living in poverty and fear, or with sicknesses and hunger, in our community. I think those who have the ability, me included, should do more to ensure that these people have a chance for a better future." – Natalle

Natalle Chan and Wing Hei Lam are students in Mrs. Sagar's Grade 10 Civics class at Pierre Elliott Trudeau High School in Markham, Ontario.

Cynicism is a seductive attitude because it allows us to be passive. It feeds hopelessness by making problems seem so big and systems so impervious to our resistance that we allow ourselves to do nothing at all.

How can these negative influences be countered and altruism nourished?

There are some encouraging attempts to address these attitudes, either through giving young people opportunities for practical action that is valorized, or through research that relates, for instance, to character education. In the latter area, the Templeton Foundation funds a number of studies that examine, for example, how goodness and personal and social responsibility are nurtured in young people, and how competence in ethical and moral reasoning is developed.

Part of the magic I observed at L'Arche is that it gives assistants the needed relational context in which their compassion or generosity are recognized. Assistants talked a lot about the importance of being part of a community of support that includes the people with developmental disabilities. There are those little moments where you can decide to do the bare minimum or you can decide to do more. Part of us wants *not* to do more. If your co-workers feel frustrated and don't share the desire that you have, it can be hard. Most individuals have a very difficult time continuing to give unless they have a supportive community around them that helps them feel nourished and stay true to their ideals. This is especially important in face of indifference from the broader society.

The ability to get behind the label and to come to know the person – an ability children have – usually needs to be relearned in adulthood. Knowing people is key. There's no 'the disabled' in a L'Arche experience. It's Peter, it's Roy. And then you see they are just like you. L'Arche assistants acquire this new learning within a powerful counter-cultural setting and they often have a sense of having grown. This can be a strong source of motivation. L'Arche regards such relations as normal,

and it needs to be careful in so doing, that it does not dampen the assistant's initial sense of radicalism and heightened awareness of the social injustice to which people with disabilities are subject in so many little ways.

Anthropologists are increasingly recognizing the importance and complex diversity of the particulars within a culture, rather than trying to find cultural universals that tend to gloss over their internal differences. Sherry Ortner, for instance, says the danger for social scientists is to see the 'other' as a category. You have to see the other person as having the same mixed, complicated motives and desires as you have, whatever their ethnicity, class, education, ability, religion. One-on-one exposure to others is a way to see people as human beings, not bundled together and labelled.

In my own youth I had exposure to a lot of different people through travel and volunteer work that my parents did. This kind of experience helps counter stereotyping. Jay and I ask ourselves as parents, are we doing enough to model service, to introduce our child to those who are different, and to nourish the roots of empathy.



The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 134 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 28 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with developmental disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.

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FOR YOUR INTEREST

Promoting the Heroic Imagination

The very same situation that can inflame the "hostile imagination" in those who become perpetrators of evil can inspire the "heroic imagination" for the first time in any of us. To become a hero involves only two steps: One must act...and that action is taken on behalf of others; it is a socio-centric act against the evolutionary imperative of being ego-centric, of not taking risks....

My concern is how to promote in our children this heroic imagination, to make them accept the mantle of being a hero-in-waiting for a situation that will come along sometime in their lives when others are following the paths toward evil or toward indifference, and instead, they elect to act.... Creating a generation of such ordinary heroes is our best defense against evil, whether on the battlefield, in prisons, or corporate headquarters.

Philip Zimbardo, author of *The Lucifer Effect*, in "Ten Questions with Dr. Philip Zimbardo," an April 26/07 interview by Guy Kawasaki on the blog, "How to Change the World."

- "The Heroic Imagination." A talk with Philip Zimbardo on the site, Edge: The Third Culture: www.edge.org
- Dr. Pamela Cushing's website: www.pamelacushing.com/index2.html?home.shtml
- York Region District School Board focuses on Character Education: www.yrdsb.edu.on.ca/page.cfm?id=ICM000001
- John Templeton Foundation: www.templeton.org
- An example of a Templeton project: The role of spirituality in developing a sense of purpose among adolescents. www.templeton.org/questions/children/
- Sherry B. Ortner, "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37: 173-93. 1995.
- Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991. Excerpts from Wuthnow's research: [click here](#).
- L'Arche contributions to Character Education: friendsofjeanvanier.ca

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