



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.

Social Innovation

An Interview with Katharine Pearson



Katharine Pearson has been with the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, one of the largest private foundations in Canada, since 1997. She is directing the Foundation's participation in the five-year "Social Innovation Generation" initiative, the goal of which is to strengthen understanding of and capacity for social innovation in Canada. She serves on the board of Oxfam-Quebec and the program advisory group of the Foundation of Greater Montreal. Katharine's father was a diplomat and she grew up in India, Mexico and France. The Hon. Lester B. Pearson was her grandfather.

Many people today believe that to solve looming global problems we need new ways of thinking. The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation is working to strengthen the understanding of and capacity for social innovation in Canada. Katharine Pearson speaks about this work. Sidebars describe two initiatives that use building space to foster networking for innovation and mutual support among groups working for social change.

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 – What, personally, drew you to focus on social innovation?

Katharine Pearson – I worked for many years in international development, with Oxfam Canada, briefly with CUSO, and with the Canadian Council for International Cooperation. It was really through this work that I learned about social innovation. In Central America in the 1980s, during the most difficult

circumstances of the civil wars there, I was struck by the unbelievably resilient and innovative capacity of some very hard hit communities not just to survive but to thrive. I didn't necessarily frame it then as innovation;

but it was this that sparked my interest and the common thread that led me in a kind of elliptical way from international development into philanthropy and to understanding

"We have an opportunity now to work in radically different ways, and that is very hopeful."

Tonya Surnam



The Centre for Social Innovation occupies the first and fourth floors of a beautifully renovated historic building at 215 Spadina Avenue in downtown Toronto. A botanical wall of plants lines the entrance from floor to ceiling, a fitting fresh breath as you enter the light and glass filled building. The Centre is a convergence centre for social innovation – a place-based hub of ideas, people, services and strategies. We offer versatile, permanent and temporary workspace, common areas and meeting spaces for over 75 social mission groups (not-for-profits, social enterprises, artists, green businesses, and individual innovators). Whether over a coffee or a conversation, CSI serves as a community centre for people with world changing ideas. My own background is in the environmental sector, but I am of the internet generation and thus see myself as part of a greater network of people trying to change the world through coordinated voice and action. The Centre is an experiment in networking for social change.

Tonya Surman is Executive Director of the [Centre for Social Innovation](#) and also Director of the [Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and the Environment](#). She has a strong background in the social and environmental sectors.



that these same capacities manifest in different ways. Another dimension of innovation, one I try always to apply, is openness to other cultures and perspectives. Growing up overseas added to my appreciation for other ways of thinking.

I've been lucky to have found places where I can use my knowledge and experience. I find it compelling to see people that McConnell funds do the kinds of things they do, again, with few resources but the ingenuity of the human spirit and mind.

McConnell emphasizes applied dissemination and sustaining social innovation. Please speak about these.

One can consider the concept of "Applied Dissemination" as how most of us think and work: we pick up ideas and approaches from our personal and professional lives and apply them in different venues. The more systematic Applied Dissemination process that the Foundation has supported with numerous organizations is enormously time consuming and requires a lot of skill and dedication; but of itself, it may not achieve the broader social change objectives of the organization. Our learning is that by thinking through what it is you want to achieve you might come up with a whole different operational system, different relationships and networks, a different understanding of how resources could be applied to leverage the greatest possible impact. With a more linear growth process the tendency is to stay a little bit stuck in one particular approach.

When we started helping organizations to spread their programs across Canada, we thought of it as a fairly straightforward process. You take innovative program X, test and document it, and give it to community Y to apply it locally – do this and you will grow. But, as we've found with everything that we've funded, it's never a linear process. So there's been an evolution at McConnell, recognizing it's not just about the mechanics of spreading, although there is some of that. You do have to have solid research, good documentation of the effectiveness of your program, good contacts, communities that are eager to learn from you, financial resources. *And* you need to



Sr. Agathe Dupuis



Le Carré St-Louis de Joliette opened this year in the huge former mother-house of our religious community, the Soeurs des Saints-Coeurs de Jesus et de Marie, in the heart of Joliette. After reflecting with many lay townspeople about how we could use this building to continue in a different way our mission and long commitment to people who are vulnerable, we sold our building to four specific carefully chosen initiatives. Totally renovated and made accessible, the Carré consists of Maison Pauline Bonin, providing counselling and 12 apartments for women and families in transition; Annexe à Roland, a job-training program for young people who learn cooking, catering, and household maintenance, 27 low-income apartments, and a wing of affordable office space. L'Arche Joliette has an office and a spacious sunny atelier there. As we had hoped, a synergy is emerging among these groups and local townspeople. The dining room in l'Annexe has become for many a great place to connect, share ideas, and collaborate. I represent the Sisters on the lay foundation established to ensure Le Carré's future.

Sr. Agathe Dupuis served on her congregation's council as they developed plans for *Le Carré St-Louis*. She has also given leadership in L'Arche for 25 years.

think about how you're going to sustain whatever it is that is being shared. But there is another dimension that needs to be considered having to do with how we change social structures and other factors in communities to allow people and programs to thrive.

The best example I can give is PLAN, with which L'Arche works closely. We co-experimented with them on Applied Dissemination – indeed, they were one of the first Foundation grantees to test this methodology. They had thought that spreading PLAN's approach [building support networks with families of people with disabilities] across the country would impact more families, but they came to see they could do this forever and not significantly change the context in which these people live. To have a bigger impact on society as a whole and on people with disabilities, PLAN shifted its focus to changing public attitudes and influencing public policy and regulatory regimes, and to the social context, trying to help communities become more receptive places, places of belonging – what L'Arche is doing too. Through this broader approach, instead of helping 10,000 families they can help perhaps a million.

Where does the dissemination of values come in?

Dissemination of values in the absence of something tangible is difficult, as is dissemination of a program without an articulated values base. The organizations Oxfam Canada supported in Central America had broad social justice agendas but they couldn't achieve those and spread their values without the concrete – people needed food, shelter, education. So they served the whole body – spirit, mind and physical body. The most effective organizations think broadly in terms of vision – they have inspiring ideas about how to change the world – and they also offer something very specific. L'Arche, for example, offers necessary services to people, but like PLAN, imbued in this is an ethos, a value system, that's powerful.

Why is social innovation awakening such interest today?

I think social innovation has come about by necessity,

because we are in urgent need of it, and it has also come about by design. Collectively, we have laid the groundwork with a plethora of accessible information, especially on the world wide web. We have an opportunity to harness knowledge and creativity globally in a way we've never had before. And, especially on the environmental front, from a global perspective there is a sense of vulnerability for the species that we may not have experienced before. This context is generating all kinds of creative ideas. We see these coming to the Foundation, particularly from people in their 20s and 30s. It's incredibly encouraging. They don't think in sectors, in narrow silos. They have a broad view of how to effect change and no hesitancy in talking to CEOs, government ministers or university presidents.

The danger is that innovation becomes another buzz word, the mot du jour, so everyone (especially funders!) wants the innovative and they don't want to fund the tried and true. We are right to be concerned about that, but at the same time I think that we have an opportunity now to work in radically different ways, and that to me is very hopeful. We have the capacity to heal this planet. I believe that fundamentally.



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

A Book To Read

Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed, by Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman, and Michael Quinn Patton, New York: Random House, 2006.
"This book is for ordinary people who want to be more than just anxious critics of the status quo or wishful thinkers about a better future... people who want to make the impossible happen.... We tend to see the world as a machine and use metaphors (things working 'like clockwork,' management 'tools') that reflect this. Complexity science embraces life as it is: unpredictable, evolving, emerging, adaptable – not machine-like at all! The science of complexity helps us to see the world through a different lens, make a fundamental shift in perception – from complexity as obstacle to complexity as opportunity. Connections or relationships define how complex systems work.... Using insights about how the world is changed, we can become active participant in shaping those changes...."

(excerpted and adapted from the Foreword and Chapter One)

- The J.W.McConnell Family Foundation: www.mcconnellfoundation.ca/
- Social Innovation Generation project: www.mcconnellfoundation.ca
- Katharine Pearson, "Accelerating Our Impact: Philanthropy; Innovation, and Social Change." www.mcconnellfoundation.ca/
- Katharine Pearson, "A Summary of Lessons from Applied Dissemination Grants." www.mcconnellfoundation.ca
- PLAN Institute for Caring Citizenship: www.planinstitute.ca/
- Tamarack: An Institute for Sustaining Social Engagement: tamarackcommunity.ca/ssi.html
- Centre for Social Innovation Research in N.B.: www.unb.ca/cesir/
- University of Alberta School of Business-Social innovation through entrepreneurship: www.bus.ualberta.ca/ccse/
- Voluntary Gateway.ca house, a resource in Newfoundland and Labrador: voluntarygateway.ca/en
- Adrienne Clarkson, "The Society of difference." www.lafontaine-baldwin.com
- Thomas Homer-Dixon, *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization*, Random House, 2006. Read more.

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