



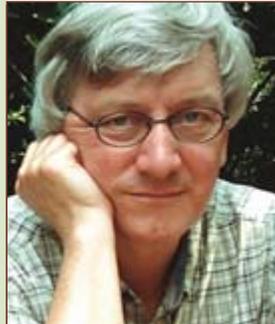
L'Arche Canada offers this "thought sheet" as a contribution to the public conversation about values and the shaping of the social ethos in which we live. Our perspective comes from two broad sources: (1) from thirty-five years of living together in community as a diverse group of people, differently 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.

# A Human Future

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## *Conversation That Shapes Society* An Interview with Philip Coulter



Philip Coulter is a documentary producer with the CBC Radio program *Ideas*. A graduate of Trinity College, Dublin and McGill University, his documentary work has explored diverse topics from the Maya and Inca people today, to what makes great racing drivers, to Hans Christian Andersen. He has also produced many of the contemporary CBC Massey Lectures. Currently, he's working on a series about the people who live in the shadow of Chernobyl, to be aired in the fall. He is married to CBC music producer Ann MacKeigan and they have a daughter of nine.

*When in 2001 I co-edited a book with Philip Coulter, I quickly came to appreciate Philip's incisive questions and determination to go to the heart of issues. It is the same quality so evident in the many Ideas documentaries he produces for CBC Radio. In 1998, he produced Jean Vanier's Massey Lectures (Becoming Human). Recently he returned to Vanier and the original L'Arche community of Trosly, France, to produce the series The Gift of Love. Beth Porter, ed.*

*Readers may subscribe to A Human Future at [www.larche.ca](http://www.larche.ca).*

**Beth Porter:** You were brought up in Ireland and, in 1969, came to Canada to study for two years. Why did you stay?

**Philip Coulter:** Coming to Canada profoundly shaped me, in many ways making me a sentient human being. I stayed on, working in theatre, and eventually realized I had become Canadian. In 1969, the country was going through huge changes. This continues to influence me. Canada is engaging in a fascinating if unconscious national conversation about what it is to live in society. The overarching question is how are we balancing the values and needs of the individual or group against those of the whole. This debate has always been, in my time, in the context of a multicultural post-nationalist civic society. In this, I believe we lead the world. We are filled with doubt about the nature of what we are building, and I think this too is good.

**"Such an encounter is life-changing."**

I'm curious about the things that form us as societies and how we choose to live together. I think this is the common thread in the CBC Ideas programs I produce. In

## Hon. Roy J. Romanow



*My anxiety [over the future of Canada] is occasioned...by the erosion of this country's legacy and values, and by a growing assault on policies based on that legacy. We are again at a pivotal moment in our history and, frankly, many more of us need to stand up for a country based on fairness, opportunity, respect, and balance between the individual and society. The current political culture militates against visionary leadership and active citizen participation....*

*For certain, the soil has been tilled for the sprouting of views at odds with shared destiny, and today there is a palpable momentum toward decentralization, individualism, and privatization, all peddled as a means to forge a stronger nation.*

*Fuelled by global trade agreements and, at home, by pressure for more powerful provinces able to implement programs as each sees fit, unbridled competition appears to be the new orthodoxy. This potent mix could alter decades of successful national advancement and threaten Canada's collective prosperity.*

Excerpted from "A House Half Built" by the Hon. R. J. Romanow, *The Walrus*, June 2004, pp. 48-54. Roy Romanow, former premier of Saskatchewan, is a senior fellow at the University of Saskatchewan, and a fellow at the Atkinson Foundation.



social and maybe even in spiritual terms these are important questions.

### What do you like about doing the CBC Massey Lectures?

I love the stimulation of engaging with the minds of some of the brightest people in the country. Usually the author will send chunks some months in advance. I serve as what in publishing would be called a substantive editor, commenting on the ideas and the structure. Of course, in the end it's their set of lectures and their book. The lectures are given in front of a live audience now, in five cities across the country. I enjoy going on the road too. It appeals to my theatre background. The final phase is shaping the raw recording into a broadcast. There's a dynamic quality to the Masseys at their best. They have always tried to be on the cutting edge of what we are thinking about, what's troubling us, what we need to talk to each other about.

### What drew you back to Jean Vanier for your recent programs?

As a documentary maker I'm interested in ideas that point to the larger work of civilization, how are we struggling forward, and where we might learn. In *Becoming Human*, Jean developed a set of ideas as to how we might better live together in a spiritual context. Parts of those ideas had spontaneously found secular expression outside of Jean's influence. I wanted to readdress the question of the secular application of Jean's ideas.

One of Jean's most profound insights was the realization that the encounter with the weak – not specifically the disabled, but anybody who is other, the poor, sick, dying, anybody whom our society puts outside of the norm – that such an encounter is life changing. That encounter happened to him in France when he started L'Arche in the mid-1960s: the realization that these people had gifts to give us, that much comes back to us, and secondly, that it was not a hierarchal relationship. Everyone is equal and the gifts of all are valued.

Occasionally, we experience this, and to a degree it is the road we are all on. That insight is not far removed from what some

## Dr. Margaret A. Somerville



Owen Egan

*Religion, science and ethics are all journeys of the human imagination. The mystical imagination, the scientific imagination and the moral imagination are all linked. As theologian, Ron Rolheiser, tells us, like science, the purpose of the mystical imagination, and, I would add, the moral imagination, “is to help us see, understand, imagine, speak about, and relate to reality, particularly, realities that cannot be perceived directly through our senses, in a way beyond fantasy and superstition.” Both these imaginations can show us some things “that science, wonderful though it is, cannot.” The mystical imagination can show us the many realities, for instance, love, that are not perceived directly by our physical senses. The moral imagination allows us access to concepts of good and evil, right and wrong, that is, access to the domain of another intangible, the human conscience.*

From an unpublished draft of the CBC Massey Lectures to be given by Margaret Somerville in November, 2006. Dr. Somerville holds the Samuel Gale Chair in the Faculty of Law, McGill University, and also a professorship in the Faculty of Medicine. She was founding director of the McGill Centre for Medicine, Ethics and Law.



other philosophers speak of. For instance, Emmanuel Levinas sees right action as shaped by our beholding the face of the other. To some extent we are mirrored in the other person, and this is the source of the ethical imperative.

I’m drawn to Vanier’s optimism. He picks up on what he sees in the world as already good – the good coming out of people – and he is trying to give it coherence and form without being doctrinaire. There’s a dynamic, questioning quality to his thinking – it depends on the encounter with the world. I noticed this again in L’Arche, now in response to needs in the Muslim world: What form might L’Arche take? How to find other vocabulary for its values? This notion that different words exist in different cultures for the same things and what we are searching for is that shared language, brings to mind Margaret Somerville, with whom I’m working on this year’s Massey Lectures. She speaks of how, out of a shared language comes a shared ethics. How might we reasonably behave towards each other may be the single most important question facing us today. I think about these things because they shape the kinds of questions that I try to bring to my programs.

I’m fascinated by the degree to which as a society we seem driven by a kind of spiritual search, even though we don’t use that word much when developing social policies. It seems the yearning to make the world better inevitably takes us down a path that is not rational. John Ralston Saul talks about the shadow of the Enlightenment – that while it was profoundly important in freeing us from superstitions and made possible modern science, it did so at the cost of other faculties that have become less respected – our intuition, sense of history, sense of morality. It’s a matter of balance.

### Where are the challenges to this balance today?

I’m leery of ideologies and boxes that allow us to divide ourselves from one another. I think the possibility for understanding about the world can come to us in a multitude of forms

and from outside all religious traditions.

Ideology tends to begin with principles that are unarguable. Many political philosophies are like that. You either accept the core principles or you don't. I'm uneasy with the ethics generated by this kind of thinking. I'm attracted to an ethics based on what seems to make sense in terms of social organization and how we might behave towards each other – what we can make an argument for as giving the maximum of good and the minimum of evil in a given situation.

Since I did the documentary *Rules of the Game*, about the detainees at Guantanamo, I've been following the case of Omar Khadr, the Canadian teenager detained there. The Khadr family is difficult for most Canadians: they have unsavoury connections, they're defiant. I find myself asking, what are their rights, what do they deserve, and what do we claim as Canadians to stand for. It's not a matter of whether we like people or not. It's easy to be nice to people who fit in. It's not so easy with people who have sharper edges. In a sense, they become the true test of our society.

*A Human Future* is edited by Beth Porter.



*The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 130 communities of L'Arche on five 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

### The common ground

We're in a society where for the first time [in human history] people are sensitive to the person as being important. ... There's been enormous work done so that people of other cultures, or with disabilities, are seen as important. But we have to go further and to try to see that all people are finding life worth living. I go into old people's homes, and they are places of death, of loneliness. Our world is divided into those who succeed and those who are victims. How [do we] bring these [groups] together so as to make of our world places of celebration and happiness?... What is it that brings me out of a feeling of power and success – that will help me jump over the frontier that separates me from other people? The common ground will probably be suffering... What suffering do I have to go through to discover that other people are suffering also?

*Jean Vanier, Excerpted from The Gift of Love, a two-part CBC Ideas program aired May 3 and 4, 2006.*

- *The Walrus* ([www.walrusmagazine.com](http://www.walrusmagazine.com)) seeks "to advance education through the promotion of writing, literacy, art and public discourse on matters of importance to Canadians." Theme of the June 2006 issue is "National Dreams."
- About Emmanuel Levinas: *The New York Times*, December 27, 1995 <http://home.pacbell.net/atterton/levinas/Obituary.htm>
- John Ralston Saul: *The Unconscious Civilization*, The Massey Lectures, Anansi, 1995.
- Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human*, The Massey Lectures, Anansi, 1998.
- Margaret A. Somerville, *The Ethical Canary: Science, Society and the Human Spirit*, Viking/Penguin, 2000. "Perfection? Human Values in the Balance." *A Human Future*, September 2004.
- CBC Ideas website: [www.cbc.ca/ideas/index.html](http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/index.html)  
Past programs can be ordered, usually in audio format.
- The Euston Manifesto: Describing itself as "a fresh political alignment." [eustonmanifesto.org](http://eustonmanifesto.org)
- Linda McQuaig, "Hate and Hysteria in the Canadian News," [www.straightgoods.ca](http://www.straightgoods.ca)
- The Council of Canadians, [www.canadians.org](http://www.canadians.org)
- The Atkinson Foundation: [atkinsonfdn.on.ca/](http://atkinsonfdn.on.ca/)  
The National Index of Wellbeing: [www.atkinsonfoundation.ca](http://www.atkinsonfoundation.ca)

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