



A Human Future

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Discovering what brings us together An Interview with Pamela Wallin

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.



Pamela Wallin's distinguished career spans 30 years and several continents. She has worked with CBC radio, in the Ottawa bureau of the Toronto Star, as co-host of Canada AM, as CTV's Ottawa bureau chief, and as first woman co-anchor of CBC television's nightly national news, and she has run her own production company hosting a nightly interview program. She has received many honours for her work. In 2002, she accepted an appointment to the prestigious post of Canada's Consul General to New York City.

I spoke to Pamela Wallin in her New York office this summer as she was winding up her role as Canadian Consul General. As one of Canada's best known and loved journalists, she needs no introduction. Some readers may recall an excellent interview she did with Jean Vanier on CBC Newsworld a few years ago.

Beth Porter, ed.

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Beth Porter: What has been your work as Canadian Consul General in New York?

Pamela Wallin: If Michael Wilson is our ambassador to Capital Hill to cover politics, I'm here as the ambassador to Wall Street to deal with the financial end. Those two worlds intersect, and the issues in the post 9/11 world of security cross both of our portfolios all the time. Of course New York is a very special case because it's also the media and culture capital.

Journalists spend their lives arriving at stories and becoming experts on something in five minutes, reading in the car or the plane.

This has been an extraordinary opportunity to live and breathe a place for four years and to get a

real sense of who these people are. They've invited me into their home as it were, into their country.

Is there a thread connecting this job, your career in journalism, and your early training in social work?

Both this job and journalism are about putting the

"We need to learn to say what we mean to one another...."

Mark Kingwell



The basic issue of all ethical reflection is the difficulty of living with others....

How is it possible for me, for this consciousness I call myself, to bridge the gap between what I experience directly and what I presume (but can only presume) is the experience of another?... We're all in this together – together and alone. This presumption of shared aloneness is thin but necessary and it is the basis for all ethical obligations of care and respect....

Emotional connection, and the moral imagination that makes it possible, is [indispensable].... There are risks as well as rewards here, as we all know.... Like the theatre goes described centuries ago by Aristotle, we put ourselves in a fragile, volatile state whenever we reflect on the nature of our obligations.

We do not – cannot – love every other conscious being. But we can and must look to love's lessons for insight into the basic nature of all obligation.

Excerpts from *Catch and Release: Trout Fishing and the Meaning of Life*, (Penguin, 2004), pp. 226-231. Mark Kingwell is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto and the author of nine books and many articles on culture and politics.



right people together to have the right conversation. And it's like anything else – you have to be respectful of human beings, do your homework, find out what motivates them, what their passions are, and engage them in conversation that's of interest to them and not just to us.

I guess I've always wanted to change the world. Social workers want to improve the lot of individuals. Journalism allowed me to engage larger audiences. What's at the core of relationships between individuals, and audiences, and also between countries is the need to be respectful of one another. Mark Kingwell, a philosopher in Canada, talks about the difference between growing up in small towns and in large cities. In small communities you can't afford to fight or be rude because you have to keep dealing with these same people daily; you don't have the luxury of anonymity that an urban setting permits. If we can take those small town rules that allow the community to succeed and transfer them to the larger stage, then we are going to be more civil, decent, and understanding people. In the diplomatic field I'm trying to bring this same approach between two countries.

You yourself come from a small Saskatchewan town.

Yes, so I understand this. My sister and I used to laugh because we both moved away, but when she decided to have children she moved back because, as she said, "everything I hated about it as a kid – that everybody knew what we were up to all the time – I love about it as a mother." There's a sense that you are your brother's keeper in a small town.

I think Jean (Vanier) captures this notion when, in encountering people with disabilities, he asks "What can I learn?" as opposed to "How can I change these people and make them like me?" This is fundamental to understanding how we have to deal with everybody. We who are not intellectually challenged have much to learn from people who haven't learned to camouflage their feelings and who are so much more direct. We need to learn to say what we mean to one another as



Michael Adams



Neither a superficial pro- nor anti-Americanism will resonate with Canadians. Our research suggests a more subtle and nuanced orientation....

Our data suggest the possibility of economic integration and strategic interdependence without the loss of cultural integrity and political sovereignty. This, I would argue, is because Canada's founding values, historical experiences, and political institutions are very different from those in the United States and have a greater influence on Canadians' contemporary values than the much vaunted forces of globalization....

In my nightmares I may see the American fire melting the Canadian ice and then dream of the waters created by the melting ice drowning the fire, but this will not happen – at least not in our lifetimes. The two cultures will continue side by side, converging their economies, technologies, and now their security and defence policies, but they will continue to diverge in ways that most people in each country, I believe, will continue to celebrate.

Excerpted from *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada, and the Myth of Converging Values*, by Michael Adams with Amy Langstaff and David Jamieson, Penguin, 2003, pp. 142-143. 126. Michael Adams is the president of the Environics group of research and consulting companies.

individuals, as towns and cities, and as countries. And we need to have enough respect for people to believe that they can understand and receive it and that this can be a positive step, not a negative one.

You have said that the job of journalists is to facilitate the exchange of ideas – that people need information so they can be good and wise citizens. What information do you want to pass on to Canadians from your time as Consul General?

I think we have to start to look at what brings us together and not what separates us, and to understand that the stereotypes and generalizations just don't play. I think too often we've confused our feelings about Americans with our feelings about their administration. We wouldn't want to be judged only by the leaders that we choose or some things that come out of their mouths. I believe that there are more differences within our two respective countries than there are between them. The South in the U.S. could not be more different in terms of people, character, geography, weather, language and accent, priorities, and family structures from New York. It's like Canada, where Ontario, Alberta, Quebec, Newfoundland, Saskatchewan are all unique places. The more we know about the other the easier it's going to be to break down the barriers. Barriers, as you know well from L'Arche, are by and large based on ignorance. That ignorance is what we have to get at.

Particularly in this city, what happened with 9/11 has touched people and scarred them and changed them in a way that will forever make them different. They see the world through a very different lens now. When you meet someone in New York you never know how that person was touched by 9/11 – whether they lost a colleague or a brother or a wife or husband. This has implications because between our two countries we have the biggest trading relationship in the world. And if we do not understand how important security is to them, then we are forever going to be working around the edges on the matter of ensuring the borders are open to facilitate trade.

I think as a country we have tended to say, “That 9/11 thing was an American problem. We’re different and nicer, so that would never happen to us.” We have to understand that we are not exempt. We all have a responsibility to get to know the people around us and to engage them in conversation about our shared civic life, and also to be a bit more cognizant about what’s going on around us.

What are you moving on to this fall?

I’ll be doing some work here with a Rockefeller think tank dedicated to improving relations in the Americas, North and South; and building on a related Canadian program. Part of this is continuing to “translate,” to ensure countries understand what each other really means when they speak. I’m also doing some corporate board work at home. I have loved this job but we work eight days a week, with event after event. I’m looking forward to having a little time to think.

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

Ninety per cent of us live within a couple of hundred miles from the U.S. border with access to their media. While 90 per cent of [Americans] live far beyond those couple of hundred miles, they don't consume our media and they travel less frequently to this country. So they lack the context for understanding our different political systems and cultures. But that is not just their problem. It's our problem. One of my challenges is not only to correct the record but to try and create a picture of a new, more modern Canada, with great economic performance and a highly educated workforce. To try and break through some of those myths of the Mounties and the manners and the maple syrup, which is the way we've sold ourselves for so long.

Pamela Wallin, "The Role of Journalists in Troubled Times," Canadian Newspaper Assn. Conference, 2003.

- More about Pamela Wallin (an interview with Linda Richards) www.janmag.com/profiles/wallin.html
- A Canada-U.S. Relations Blog: www.blogscanada.ca
- "Jean Vanier in conversation with Pamela Wallin" (published in *Abilities* magazine, Winter, 1999) www.abilities.ca
- Canadian Consulate General in New York: [click here](#)
- On Canadian-U.S. Relations: [click here](#)
- U.S. Embassy in Ottawa: www.usembassycanada.gov
- Another Canadian viewpoint: [click here](#)
- Books by Pamela Wallin: *Speaking of Success: Collected Wisdom, Insights and Reflections*, Toronto: Key Porter, 2001; *Since You Asked*, Vintage Canada, 1998; *The Comfort of Cats*, Prometheus Books, 2003
- New books by L'Arche writers or on L'Arche:
 - Sue Mosteller: *Light Through the Crack: Life After Loss*, Doubleday Image Books, 2006 (Seven remarkable stories)
 - Bill Clarke: *Enough Room for Joy: The Early Days of L'Arche* (re-issued), Novalis, 2006
 - Kathryn Spink: *The Miracle, The Message, The Story: Jean Vanier and L'Arche*, Novalis, 2006
 - Jean Vanier: *Befriending the Stranger*, Novalis, 2005 (meditations on Scripture)

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