



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.

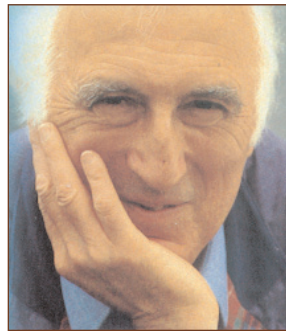
A Human Future

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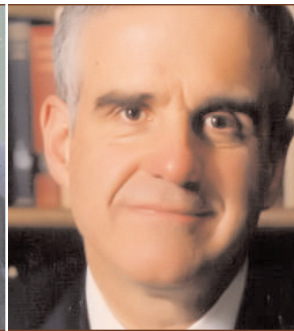
Journey to Personal and Social Transformation Special L'Arche Forum issue

On January 31, 2006, L'Arche Canada hosted a L'Arche Forum on Parliament Hill in Ottawa with Jean Vanier and Dr. Balfour Mount. It was offered internationally as a live web-simulcast and presented by CPAC on cable television. This issue of A Human Future presents a small taste of that remarkable evening. The entire two-hour program can be accessed from a link on the home page of www.larche.ca.

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



Jean Vanier is the founder of the international movement of L'Arche communities, where people who have developmental disabilities and the friends who assist them create homes and share life together. Acclaimed as "a Canadian who inspires the world" (*Macleans*' magazine) and a "nation builder" (*The Globe and Mail*), Jean Vanier is a voice for all who are marginalized.



Dr. Balfour Mount, F.R.C.S.C., is founder of the hospice movement in Canada. He is a urologist and oncological surgeon. He was the Founding Director of the Royal Victoria Hospital Palliative Care Service in 1975, Palliative Care McGill in 1990 and the McGill Programs in Integrated Whole Person Care in 1999. A beloved teacher, he is the Eric M. Flanders Professor of Palliative Medicine at McGill University.

Balfour Mount: Among the things Jean and I hold in common is the privilege of working with some of the most vulnerable members of society. They have been our teachers. Our goal this evening is to share with each other, and with you, our thoughts about the human quest – to explore the borders that define our human frailty and fears and the messages of hope that we may find there.

Jean, I hear a degree of urgency as you speak. Why is healing and transformation so important today?

Jean Vanier: We are in a world of great suffering,

Rose Decker



DOMINIC KAROLAK

Rose had a voice like no one I'd ever met before. I remember when I first heard her call out. Could this loud piercing siren of a sound be coming from the petite blond in the hall?

...One might mistakenly label Rose as "non-verbal." Yet she demonstrated many times over her incredible ability to convey emotion, directions, demands and affection without uttering a word.

Because her voice was not confined to words, it did not know how to lie. We who master language also master the ability to say things with our words that do not reflect the truth of our souls. I have learned to put on a good face no matter what is going on inside. How much time and money have many of us spent going to therapy, dealing with hang-ups about our anger, our bodies, or whatever!

Rose's voice reflected her deep sense of okayness about herself – something we all crave and what drew people to her like a magnet. Her freedom gave us a taste of our own freedom. Being in her presence one was released of the need to perform or put on a good face.

Excerpted from a eulogy given by Clara Frascetti at the funeral of Rose Decker, member of L'Arche Daybreak, December 2005.



and we live in a culture of wealth and strength and power where independence and individuality are encouraged and the people's rights protected, but where a sense of human solidarity and responsibility for those who are weak or poor is not encouraged.

The urgency also comes from my experience of having lived for 41 years with men and women who are fragile on an intellectual level but who have a potential for tenderness and love that you can't imagine – a potential for joy and to bring laughter, and in so doing to heal and free us. I myself am on a journey of transformation. It is not that it is easy to live together. I lived with Lucien, who had great anguish and screamed all day, and I realized that within me there was a potential for violence. To face this was important – to face it with the support of others in community, and to realize that I also am poor but that it is okay to be poor. When Eric, who was tiny and fragile, died, I stood at his bed and I knew that we were fundamentally the same; I also will die, and in death we are all alike. A freedom comes in accepting this. There is a link between our fear of death and the human tendency to rival others, to want to prove something.

Somehow we are so taken up by our desire to have more things or more power that we are pushing aside those who would liberate us. Can we have a vision of the world where people help one another, a society that is a body and not a pyramid with a few on top with power and wealth and the others trying to climb higher, and at the bottom the disenfranchised, the old, the fragile? Can I learn that my real value is not in power but in my capacity to be fruitful?

Bal, you speak from two worlds – the world of the healer and that of the one very close to death. Would you talk about your own discovery of the mystery of the healing process and also how you yourself have been healed.

Balfour: My two experiences of cancer were, paradoxically, positive experiences. It's difficult to make that sound sensible.

Jacques Dufresne

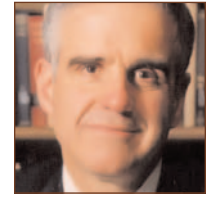


Death used to be regarded as a mystery. Today, it has become a problem. The fundamental ethical question in the debate about euthanasia lies in this degradation of the mystery of death to a problem. It is not surprising that we need laws when death is seen as a problem and not as a mystery. And it is also because death has come to be seen as a problem that legalizing euthanasia is not wise.

The fuzziness of the law is not a bad thing in this context. It avoids the illusion that a precise technical solution exists and that this solution is a “legally correct” death. This fuzziness of the law maintains doubt or uncertainty among relatives and medical caregivers, and in this way it keeps them close to the seriously ill person who is dealing with the great questions of life and death. It favours, thus, a return to a focus on the human being and on the mystery of death in a situation that tends to be too objectified.

Excerpted from “La mort dans la culture,” by Jacques Dufresne in *Le chant du cygne: Mourir avec dignité*, by Jacques Dufresne, Claude Villeneuve, H el ene Laberge, Doris Lussier, Emmanuel Goldenberg, Marcel Boisvert, Editions du Meridien, 1992. Jacques Dufresne is a philosopher, social commentator and editor of *L’encyclop edie de L’Agora*.

<http://agora.qc.ca/biblio/mort.html#culture>



There was certainly nothing romantic about them! There was, though, a discovery of meaning and connection that happened in each.

Research has shown that our generally held assumption that quality of life depends on physical well being is wrong! Seriously ill people often report equal or better life satisfaction than the general population. I may have significant pain but no anguish. Conversely, I may be symptom free and suffer terribly. How we experience suffering is modified by all domains of human experience – physical, psychological, social, spiritual, existential, and financial. In severe illness, the existential or spiritual domain is a major determinant of quality of life.

Healing itself is a mystery. The healer creates a space where healing can happen. A healing presence impacts on both meaning and connectedness – factors strongly associated with a sense of well being.

At best, we are all wounded healers. Our effectiveness comes from recognition of our own vulnerability. The wounded healer potential within both sufferer and caregiver is activated by the experience of suffering and vulnerability. This has been known for millennia. In ancient Greece, the symbol of the wounded healer was the centaur Chiron who through his own incurable wound became the greatest of healers. To be a healer – for myself, for others – I must seek to know my own woundedness. Rumi wrote 800 years ago: “Your defects are the way that glory gets manifested.” Leonard Cohen wrote: “Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There’s a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

Whoever we are, the need to feel connected lies at the core of our being. A patient named Ken has been one of my most cherished teachers. Referred to us from a maximum security prison, he had spent most of his 34 years behind bars. He certainly knew how to “get in your face.” Defences well in place, his and mine, he was now dying with advanced cancer, yet still surrounded by an aura of danger. But somehow our fears were

set aside – mine, his – and we let each other in, just a little at first; then as friends, then soul mates. Through our healing connection I found my own limitations painfully evident. To meet Ken became for me, paradoxically, to meet Christ.

Connection is a strong theme in our research. One study revealed five themes among people who suffered most: a sense of isolation, a crisis of meaning (an existential vacuum), anxious preoccupation with the past or future, a sense of victimization, and a need to be in control. Conversely, those who described themselves as feeling well, had a sense of connection – to themselves (a movement from head to heart, ego to deep centre), or to others, to the phenomenal world, or to ultimate meaning as that person understood it.

Viktor Frankl, who wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* based on his experiences in the Nazi concentration camps, was convinced that it is meaning that gives quality to life. In a remarkable assessment of human potential he writes, "Everything can be taken from a [person] but one thing: the last of human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

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, 27 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 Swan Song

Swans sing more strongly as they approach death because of their joy that they will be with God, whose servants they rightly are. Humans, because of their apprehension about death, misinterpret the swans' song, as a lament. They fail to notice that no bird sings when it is hungry or thirsty or in pain. It is evident to me that the dying swan sings more strongly because it has prescience of the goodness of the next world. For me the choice is clear: it is not of sadness that I will sing. I consider that I serve the same God as the swans.

Paraphrase of Socrates' words from *Platon, Phédon*, 85 a et b, trad. Léon Robin, *Oeuvres complètes*, La Pleiade, Paris 1950, tome 1, p 806. Quoted by Jacques Dufresne in "La mort dans la culture," *Encyclopédie de L'Agora* (www.agora.qc.ca)

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