

The Golden Thread

By Dalton J. McGuinty

In the summer of 1980 Terry Fox ran a Marathon-A-Day-of-Hope, three thousand three hundred and thirty nine miles, from Newfoundland to Thunder Bay.

The one-legged runner's outstanding athletic achievement and high humanitarian ideals stirred the pride and compassion of Canadians everywhere. As an outstanding citizen, athlete and humanitarian, he made a remarkable contribution, not only to the cause of cancer awareness and research, but also to his country.

Terry Fox has emerged as a true Canadian folk hero, a symbol for extraordinary accomplishment, who embodied ideals of courage, humanitarianism, service, compassion – an inspiration to Canadians of all ages.

In keeping with the spirit of his achievements, the Government of Canada in 1981 established the *Terry Fox Humanitarian Award Program*. By granting commemorative scholarships for the pursuit of higher education, the Program is intended to encourage Canadian youth to seek the high ideals represented by Terry Fox, to recognize those who do.

The influence of the 1980 Terry Fox event continues to be reflected and commemorated in many ways. In annual Terry Fox Runs, in programs, institutes, events, and names of parks and playgrounds, schools, streets, and arenas.

Of the many areas which reflect the continuing influence of that event, the *Terry Fox Humanitarian Award Program* reflects,

in a unique way, something about the Terry Fox impact over one particular group.

Since the Program was established, some 5,000 applications have been submitted by young Canadians from every region of Canada, with some 20,000 supporting documents. These young people, in what they say, what others say about them, reflect in many ways, and to varying degrees, dispositions to strive for those things which Terry Fox himself embodied, and which the Program looks to recognize and encourage. The highest ideals and qualities of citizenship and humanitarian service, while in pursuit of excellence in academic, amateur sport, fitness, health, voluntary community service, and related endeavours.

Five thousand young people represent almost every race and creed, socio-economic and ethnic background. And each application tells us a story unto itself—stories of young people who are always different. But in one respect forever the same.

There is clear evidence that young people and their teachers and others have been profoundly influenced for good by Terry Fox. They have been stimulated to emulate the ideals which he embodied or aspired to. The ideals of courage, unselfishness, fortitude, humanitarianism, service.

The 1980 Terry Fox event and its lingering influence raises questions.

Why have so many people, particularly the young, been so deeply moved by the Terry Fox event, not only at the moment, but in lasting ways? And is it relevant, in the sense of being pertinent and timely in a vital sort of way? Will it continue in time? And does it really matter?

Perhaps there are no single simple answers?

But there are interpretations and explanations plausible. And these follow from convictions about young people, their dispositions, beliefs, and yearnings. And about the conditioning influence which their peer group, their society, most typically wields over them.

And an appreciation of the significance of the Terry Fox 1980 event-in-time follows from a view which situates that event in the larger context of history, and the lessons of that history which we would ignore only at our peril.

These interpretations have implications regarding the role of a Program which operates to encourage, recognize, and transmit to succeeding generations something of value – something upon which a civilized community depends for its well-being.

There is first of all a basic conviction about young people. A belief which may contrast somewhat with the common view – the belief that aspirations to the ideals of courage, unselfishness, humanitarianism, service, good citizenship, are conatural to the young.

In their minds, they have an affinity for truth.

In the hearts, they have a disposition for the good.

In their imaginations, they project to ideals.

The validity of that conviction, has been confirmed with abundant evidence in materials submitted by, and on behalf of, thousands of young people from all over Canada.

It would appear also that in our Age most typically, the hunger for truth, the disposition to the good, the aspiration to ideals which are conatural to young minds and hearts, are not adequately recognized, appreciated, nor stimulated, nor satisfied.

Young people are not commonly exposed to people and events and situations which exemplify their ideals, or encourage them to strive. And they are too frequently frustrated and confused, because life around them fails to recognize, and stimulate, and to respond to their instinctive yearnings.

There is sometimes even-level mediocrity atmosphere of the school, as described by Matthew Arnold 100 years ago, where “listless teachers seized his youth, and purged his faith, and trimmed his fire.”

Lethargic passivity is induced by a T.V. with its strongman fictional James Bond-Bionic type heroes, punk and false rock-heroes, over-priced athletes. And the heroes of People’s Magazine.

But these don’t satisfy that instinctive craving which young people have for truly heroic figures with whom they can identify, to whom they can look as models to imitate in ways most satisfying.

And young people often look in vain for good example to their elders around them, who would enjoin them to do as they say—not as they do. And they are confused. Is it any wonder that, as Johnny Cash laments, the lonely voice of youth cries, “what is truth?”

Lyrics in the songs which appeal to the young, by Elton John, Harry Chapin, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, all play variations on a common theme—the frustrations of young people, their search for something more.

Slow down, you’re going too fast.”

“Good-bye yellow brick road
Where the dogs of society howl
You can’t plant me in your pent-house
I’m going back to my plow.”

“I’m a-wonderin’ if the leaders
of the nations understand
This murder-minded world
That they’re leavin’ in my hands.”

Rainy day people don’t hide love inside
they just pass it on.”

“Yes ‘n how many times can a man turn his
head,
Pretending he just doesn’t see?”

“Someday Mister I’m gonna lead a better
life than this.”

And the Boss himself has a word for those academics who think they have all the answers for young people, when they don’t even understand their questions: “We learned more from a three minute record than we ever learned in school.”

And young people are frustrated, “turned off” by a world which they see, as

described by one young girl, as having trouble “remembering its humanity, with its nuclear proliferation, acid rain, grizzly little wars, lethargy-inspiring television, opt-out drugs, love debased to sexual exploits.”

And evidence of their feelings of frustrations and futility abound.

Bookstands announce loudly their turning to primitive practices, ancient cults, programmed religions, witchcraft, astrology, spiritualism, fortune telling, communal living. All manifestations of their desire to opt out of, and away from a world which does not seem to satisfy their yearnings.

Why the very dress of youth sometimes reveals their frustration and search. Blankets like chasubles over their shoulders, priests and nuns; beads, badges, bracelets, head-bands, and other pseudo-mystic reminders of rites and rituals suggestive of things beyond the here and now of a world which fails to satisfy their hunger for something more.

But all of this gets young people nowhere. Because it is a fact of life that the vitality and satisfaction which they seek, cannot be found in mystic words and things and outward trappings. But only in the reality of actions and involvement in the world around them—a world surely in need of what their ideals can bring about in the practical order, through good works and actions—courageous, unselfish, humanitarian. The Terry Fox ideals.

And there are indications that the sensitivity of young people has been dulled—even on the level of sense.

Their sense of hearing craves assault by high-pitched electronically-amplified jungle-beats. Their fear of thoughtful

silence allayed by Sony Walkmans. Punk rock performers add the vulgar and obscene. Sadistic violence of movies and T.V. strain for shock impacts.

“Artists” project little more than endless sadistic images, and under the guise of ‘realism’ reflect back the world with a vengeance, as they write not of the heart, but of the glands.

There is sometimes provoked fatal progression from alcohol to soft and hard drugs.

Sensitivity to food is dulled by the blandness of Fast-Food-Junk.

Sensitivity to language is dulled by picture magazines, the passive-lethargic mood induced by T.V. And the imagination is not commonly stimulated as in other days, when reading and story-telling were commonplace. When sound boxes were without picture tubes, and the imagination could take us away to the worlds of Lux Theatre, Howie Wing, the Lone Ranger, Fred Allan, Jack Benny, The Shadow. (What kid today has heard of Lamont Cranston tell of what evil lurks in the hearts of men. The Shadow knows.)

And the sensitivity of young people to ideals, to the heroic, has been in some ways dulled. And hence demands stimulation by the sensational, the dramatic, to grasp their attention, to seize their youth, forge their faith, and light their fire.

There is no doubt that the world around is full of heroes-parents, teachers, nurses, social workers, policemen, and quite ordinary people, with lives of quiet ordinary people, with lives of quiet desperation, who go about their work from day-to-day, in ways heroic.

But dulled sensitivity craves a stimulation by something dramatic, sensational, extreme, to provoke a response. And hence the satisfaction of that craving, by a truly heroic figure such as Terry Fox Humanitarian Award

For what could be more captivating, dramatic, than the one-legged runner, running a Marathon a Day, from the Atlantic to Thunder Bay? And in a way with which young people could identify, as with one of themselves – real and natural – not as an image, fabricated by some P.R. agent for projection on stage, or through the media.

And this is one reason why Terry Fox has wielded such an impact, has had such a powerful, continuing, leavening influence for good over so many people, particularly the young.

He exemplifies and satisfies their minds’ affinity for truth, their hearts’ disposition for the good, their imaginations’ hunger for ideals.

And Terry Fox did this in a manner not common to their usual experiences in a form which has captivated their attention, with which they can identify.

What about the significance of this influence? Is it really relevant – pertinent and timely in a vital sort of way? Will it continue in time? And does it really matter?

To answer this question requires that the Terry Fox 1980 single event-in-time be considered in the larger context of history. That the contemporary be seen in the perspective of the past. For who can England know who only England knows?

It would appear that history and experience confirm that, both in his social

and in his personal life, man lives always more or less close to the brink of barbarism. And throughout the events of history, barbarism is not to be seen only in the forest primeval, with all its simple savageries. Nor is the barbarian one who appears only in bearskin, with club in hand. Although in fact our Age is not without its brutalities. And from day-to-day they are in fact reported faithfully by the media, in living color.

Prison guards are brutally murdered; an eight year old deaf mute girl is beaten and robbed of her birthday-party money; a young lady jogger is victim of attempted rape; a young father is beaten to death with a baseball bat; a Polish priest is brutally strangled, with complicity of people in high places; a neighborhood corner store operator is stabbed to death; teen-age suicides have increased dramatically, and vandalism; a young cyclist hit-and-run is left to die by the roadside.

But barbarism in our society is not limited to such. To think of it only as in such forms might cloud our vision of reality around. For what is out of mind is out of sight also.

Many young people, with their intuitive affinity for truth, their disposition to good, their idealism, see as well other reflections of barbarism, perhaps more subtle, but they seem them for what they are, -- and they are disillusioned.

They see through the seductive and fatal assumption at the source of a way of life that clamors the gospel that more is always better; that progress, efficiency, and monetary gain should be the ultimate goals of human activity; when economic interests assume primacy over higher values; when material standards of mass and quantity

crush out the values of quality and excellence; when technology assumes and autonomous existence, without humane controls; when the natural beauties of their God's creation is air, water and land are fouled; the State appears to be everywhere intrusive, and also impotent, with immense power, but seemingly powerless to control things that influence the lives of man from day to day, and men are victims of impersonal economic laws, with human fall-out intolerable; when the ugly odor of racism fouls the atmosphere; when professors would profess philosophies which would put an end to all philosophy and to civility itself, would undermine rational standards of judgement, not by spreading new beliefs, but by creating a climate of doubt and bewilderment in which clarity about the larger aims of life is dimmed.

When these things are to be seen, barbarism is about, alive, too well, whatever the surface impressions of urbanity and civilization, in a society however modern in other ways.

And young people, with their instinctive inclinations for truth, goodness and ideals, not yet desensitized, have an ability to see these forms of barbarism, for what they are. And are they disenchanted, frustrated, "turned off."

History shows also that society has been rescued from barbarism, and from chaos, time and time again, only by a few. Not by the many. *Paucis Humanum Vivit Genus*. To say this is not to endorse the concept of the fascist elite -- a barbarous concept if there ever was one. It is only to recall a lesson of history to which our sophisticated modern technological era should pay heed, or at its peril fail to. For we are not behind our forbears in devising the barbaric, and reflections are not difficult

to see, as they are seen by many young people not yet conditioned to adapt.

But in our Age, as in every one, while many people have the impulse to react against the barbaric, have ideals, and embody them only a very few have a capacity to do so in truly heroic and impressive ways, which grasp attention and impress their fellow man.

Anne Frank, Dag Hammarskjold, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Ghandi, John Kennedy, Mother Teresa, Jean Vanier. And even in some such cases, their impact is wielded only by the dramatic, tragic endings, which seem almost required for effect, to arrest attention and impress.

A couple of years ago an ordinary man whose identity will remain forever unknown inspired a nation by just one little act of service. He was a passenger in an airplane which took off in a Washington one freezing-cold February day, and which crashed into the icy waters of the Potomac.

As he clung to the tail of the sinking plane, this man saw many hands reach out desperately from the water to grasp for the lifelines dropped from the circling helicopters, as rescue crews and passers-by tried by every means to save the survivors.

This one man, who seemed like an ordinary, middle-aged businessman or a civil servant – we shall never know – forgetting his own safety, kept catching the lifeline, and passing it to others. He refused to consider himself a victim, but acted as part of the rescue team. Finally, in exhaustion, he went under, giving his life for others.

A real hero, forever anonymous, who showed that no man is an island and “ordinary”.

The selflessness of that man inspired millions who watched his actions on television, or who were to read about them.

As a *Time* magazine writer so aptly put it: “If that man in the water gave a lifeline to the people around him grasping for survival, he was also giving a lifeline to those who observed him – He was the best that humanity could do.”

Figures such as these illustrate a basic fact of life. It is the fact that in any one Age, only a relatively few people really experience the informing, transforming power of ideals. Have aspired to them. By their courageous example and sacrifice have embodied them, sustained them in being. By their power of personality have projected them in captivating ways. By their courage, strength, disposition, and mysterious God given drive, have stood apart, to impress the mass of common men, we who are relatively indifferent, apathetic, weak, or unable.

These few, common to every Age reflect, in truly heroic ways, minds with an affinity for truth, hearts with a disposition to the good, imaginations which project to ideals, and the courage and strength to follow through. And by their example they hold in check the forces of barbarism that are forever threatening the civilized community.

For the truths and ideals which are reflected, and which stimulate the impulses of this few, are a patrimony. They are a heritage from history and tradition. And through all the dark and bloody pages of our history, whatever the seemingly overpowering presence of barbarism, from

the Vandals to the Vikings, the Inquisition to the Reign of Terror, from Auschwitz to Vietnam, to Beirut and the Philippines, San Salvador and Poland, there runs a Golden Thread – a thread precious, fragile, at time almost obliterated, but ever unbroken.

And this Golden Thread is the tradition of idealism and civility, and their reflections – courage, humanitarianism, service, compassion, magnanimity – the qualities that make life livable – as these are given a local habitation and a name in those who embody them.

In a manner which captivated the attention of a generation which craves for the sensational – requires it to arrest attention, in a manner dramatic, compelling, moving, impressive, Terry Fox did his part to sustain this Golden Thread in a world in which at times it seems almost to have been broken, at times when the bad news we get about Terry Fox's generation seems to overshadow the good.

And this suggests the function of the *Terry Fox Humanitarian Award Program*, and why it is relevant, in the sense of being pertinent and timely in a vital sort of way – and will always be so.

That patrimony, heritage, tradition, whose ideals Terry Fox embodied – his instinctive impulse to the good, his aspiration to ideals, may, like any heritage, be lost to mind, deformed, eroded, the Golden Thread obliterated, as almost, in the horrors of Nazi Germany.

It has been traditionally the role of home, school, and Church to transmit this tradition, to enculturate, with education as a means whereby the older generation protects itself from the younger.

In our Age, the mass media play a major role in this regard, and in the case of the 1980 Terry Fox event in time, the media projected that which appealed to the appetite for the sensational, grasped attention, captivated the public mind, as they reported an item of news value – the one legged marathon a day, to its moving finish.

But surely it would be naïve to rely unduly upon the media to serve this role, as agents of enculturation. The mass media are dubious agents on which to rely for something so important – a perilous place to deposit what ought to be kept more safe, and transmitted more constantly and completely.

For the media, like the public mind, which is itself a repository of the tradition of civility, is subject to the corrosive rust of scepticism, the voracious appetite for the novel and the sensational, the incessant thieveries of indifference, the intrusive demands of the market. This in a society not typically disposed. And to the innate tendency of the media to consider good news as not of news value, notwithstanding the hunger which people have, to offset that which is most typically projected.

That tradition which the Terry Fox 1980 event embodied must be preserved in places more permanent, and transmitted by means more responsible. For emotional responses of the moment, of the kind which the Terry Fox incident easily engendered, and which the media highlighted, even thought objectified in names given to parks and playgrounds, may serve no worthwhile lasting purpose, may not condition or qualify in any significant ways the barbaric elements ever around.

You cannot cure cancer of the liver with a band-aid.

And so it is a basic function of the *Terry Fox Humanitarian Award Program* to work for the continuity of the 1980 Terry Fox event. To transmit forever into the future something of its spirit. To recognize and encourage young people to seek high ideals which Terry Fox embodied. To inform and transform them. To provoke their idealism, stimulate their imaginations, kindle their sparks, light their fires. To make of them forever – after haunted men, to encourage and sustain them as they do their part to maintain that Golden Thread.

In thousands of instances, in thousands of young people, from every region of Canada, urban and rural, of every race, and creed, and ethnic background, that thread is to be seen with startling clarity – in their idealism, civility, courage, humanitarianism, service, compassion, magnanimity. And these very impulses of the kind which make life worth living manifested in the face of obstacles – physical and psychological, social and economic. And these reflections often unheralded and unrecognized, overshadowed by the bad news about the young commonly in the foreground. Young people who, but their involvement, reflect what Washington columnist George Will refers to as “heartening recalcitrances in society, durable patterns of action that are healthier than current dogmas,” impulses to the good, which contrast with the barbaric elements ever around.

Terry Fox Humanitarian Award evaluation criteria look to qualities of courage, unselfishness, fortitude, humanitarianism, “the highest ideals and qualities of citizenship and humanitarian service.” While in pursuit of excellence in academic, athletic, extra-curricular, and voluntary community service activities.

While criteria are difficult to define in the abstract, they are reflected in thousands of applications and supporting documents.

Those few who have been selected for this prestigious commemorative Award are symbolic of many others. And while these young people are all different, in a way they are all the same.

They are the same insofar as, like their model Terry Fox, there is something distinctive, unique, about the way in which they reflect these qualities. A way which embodies the essence of the Terry Fox spirit.

The essence of that spirit would appear to be a unique combination of heroism and modesty. And statements by and about young people invariably reflect these – but only as underlying tones.

I have seen him on many occasions, in fact daily, come to school having helped with the milking and feeding in the early morning hours, cleaned the stables, attended school all day, go home by school bus, milk the cows, feed them etc., and be at a minor hockey of hockey practice by 6:30p.m. No small task for a young man! This load did not lessen with his high school years; rather it increased.

There are not many organized activities in my area, but I do what I can to lend a helping hand at any time to anyone in need – helping people in times of sorrow, from doing barn chores, to digging the graves for the deceased.

A young boy's parents died within months. "I took up complete emotional and financial support for my family. How could I let them down?

I just did what was expected of me. I have always portrayed these ideals as best as I could but I have never had a reason to portray them as strongly as I did then.

Terry's run while financially successful, accomplished something far more for me and for which I will forever be grateful. The word cancer, the problems related to it, the desperate need to find a cure, have been brought out in the open.

As a young teenager, this has meant I can be more openly discuss my problem without (to a large degree) fear of having people react as though I had some terrible contagious disease.

The minor handicap I have is nothing compared to Terry's. I plan to devote my future to caring for people with physical handicaps, especially children. Terry Fox gave his life so others would benefit. In my own personal small way, I plan to devote my future not only to show that cancer can be beaten, but to assist those who can benefit from my giving.

A teen-age cancer victim took time off to have his leg amputated, undergo extensive chemotherapy.

Within ten days of surgery I was back in school, not disabled, just a little inconvenienced.

After being cured and then having cancer a second time makes you wonder if it will come back a third time. It has caused me to live to the fullest and unfortunately my academics have suffered some because I don't want to give up my community works and athletics because to me they are just as important.

To enable me to participate in all the activities I enjoy, I require a swimming prosthesis. In all, I have five legs including my sound limb. The normal person only has two. Who's disabled?

While maintaining the highest academic standing in her school, widely involved in volunteer community activities, a young girl whose parents adopted seven children in addition to their own four works hard to sustain the family farm.

All my spending money, which I earn by babysitting, must be spent towards buying gasoline to go to those places for any community efforts. Time is always a problem because I have chores, both in the house and outside with the animals, to do before I can go anywhere.

A 20 year old boy spent his spare time for five years doing volunteer work with mentally retarded adults, living, and working in Jean Vanier homes.

A 20 year old single handed established a recreational day camp for the handicapped – deaf, retarded, blind – taught the blind to waterski and jump. Terry Fox ran by his camp. “I had a chance to meet this great man, and I even ran with him for a short distance.”

A 19 year old with cerebral palsy – speech impaired somewhat spastic, praised by all for the good example set by his work on behalf of children. “There was no task assigned or undertaken that he wouldn’t do – with whatever difficulty.”

A 20 year old medical student performed extensive volunteer work – on rehabilitation and pediatric wards, with teen counseling, children’s camps, community service of many kinds:

I first became interested in medicine after seeing the tremendous need there was for physicians in Africa... It is my hope that I can be a competent and caring physician... I feel I have the skills to share.

A young nursing student maintains top academic standing with participation in volunteer community service, while caring for her severely impaired mother and sister. “I am the eldest girl in a family of five children. It was expected of me to assume the role of mother and housekeeper. I did both.”

Her career as a student was remarkable. I became aware of her home life because I realized the insight she displayed in fiction and poetry she wrote could not have been created in a vacuum.

Many young people such as these have applied to the Program only when enjoined by others to do so.

No recipient has considered themselves to be worthy of the Award.

Their statements, and letters by those who write on their behalf, reflect implicit, underlying, tones of Terry Fox’s spirit.

There are many sources of hope in this world.

And surely young people of this kind who aspire to, and emulate the ideals embodied by Terry Fox are among them. Perhaps our last best hope – as they reflect that Golden Thread – as they are living and fitting memorials to Terry Fox – by their courage, humanitarianism, and community service they bear living witness.

And this gives to the *Terry Fox Humanitarian Award* a kind of imaginative excitement, a relevance – as it will continue forever to be pertinent and timely in a vital sort of way.

For you can count the seeds in an apple. But God alone can count the apples in a seed.

To situate one modest Program in the context of history, and to assign a responsibility to transmit and stimulate and promote and recognize ideals of courage,

unselfishness, humanitarianism and community service, as a leavening influence for good over a society in which elements of barbarism are alive and too well, is not to impose upon it a Messianic role. After all, it is only one comparatively incidental undertaking, and will be forever limited in its doings only to what it can reasonably be expected to do, with a modest influence perhaps minimal.

But this Program can operate as a supplement to home, school, and Church and other agencies which are influences for good, and which God knows, could use assistance in this regard.

As a civilized community, our society depends for its well-being, perhaps its very survival, on people, young and old, who strive for ideals of courage,

unselfishness, humanitarianism, magnanimity, service. For without them our civilized society may very well be deprived of the kind of citizens we need for survival. And a Program such as this may work to recognize and stimulate a few. And so it may be.

But society must look to other means as well to control the barbarians who are forever at the gates of the city, or within.

And young people must look elsewhere to satisfy their hunger, and set their lasting hopes.

April 26, 1980, South Brook Junction, Newfoundland, was day 15, 337 miles, on Terry Fox's Marathon-a-day-of-Hope. He got up at 4:00 a.m. to fog, drizzly damp and cold. His 25 mile run the day before had developed painful sores. But he took off, hoping to cover 14 miles at the outset. After 3 miles he became dizzy, light-headed, with double vision.

In his journal for the day he wrote:

I told myself it is too late to give up. I would keep going no matter what happened... If I died, I would die happy because I was doing what I wanted to do... I went out and did fifteen push-ups in the road and took off. I want to set an example that will never be forgotten.

Robert Duvall has the last words in that moving picture:

"He was quite a kid. And don't you forget him."