

## Director's Letter

### The Humanities in a Less-Than-Humane Time

Again I am glad to be in touch with you, the readers of *Humanitas*. Many of you teach or study at SFU, some live and work in the community of greater Vancouver or elsewhere in British Columbia, and some in the great world beyond this province of great physical beauty and political, economic and social diminishment. Wherever you work and think and hope, we greet you, and invite you to work and think and hope with us as we study and act on the fourfold mandate of the Institute: Violence and its Alternatives, Human Rights and Democratic Development, the Humanities and Contemporary Culture, and Community Education. Together these emphases stretch us to explore the limits and the capacities of the *humanum* in what I find myself calling a less-than-humane time, a time in which the *geist* of the *zeit* is querulous, fearful and distracted.

If we have ever had second thoughts about our work on the theme of Violence and its Alternatives, for example, the year of grace 2003 would have settled them for us. It was the year in which the unelected president of a powerful nation, possessed by the archetypes of warrior and savior, sent the young women and men of the armed forces of his nation into action against a nation laughably weaker, in search of weapons of mass distraction. It was the year in which the cuneiform tablets of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, arguably the world's oldest narrative, were looted from the Baghdad Museum. It was also the year in which Canada took the road harder to travel, and declined to join the coalition responsible for these travesties. In this connection, two speakers generously funded by the Leon and Thea Koerner Foundation, and offered to the community in co-operation with Burnaby Mountain College, were Senator Douglas Roche and the CBC's Eleanor Wachtel, both of whom, in different ways, addressed the theme "The New World Order After Iraq: Negotiating Citizenship." The fourth annual Joanne Brown Symposium addressed the related motif of exile, which with leadership from David Kettler, Martha Langford and Jerry Zaslove proved highly stimulating to the 14 of us very willingly cooped up on Bowen Island during the heaviest rainstorm in BC since 1883.

The mention of Burnaby Mountain College moves me to commend to you this nascent effort at the creation of a residential community of scholars and grad students here on the Burnaby campus, similar in ethos to Green College at UBC. I represent the Institute on the BMC steering committee; and the goals and objectives of the College so nearly approximate those of the Institute that it is increasingly clear that a strong element in our future must be more joint planning and programming with the College. Here I would also mention the Community Education Program of Continuing Studies at Harbour Centre, the splendid work of which in the public program entitled "Seeking Justice: Human Rights in our Communities", we have been proud to support in pursuit of

another dimension of our mandate. We also see the Laurier Institution, with its concerns around citizenship, as another organization with which we hope to develop closer co-operation. Partnership and co-sponsorship, then, must mark our future.

This year the Institute marked its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary; and so significant a milestone has moved us to approach the University Advancement Office, and to explore the possibilities of a funding campaign which would enable us to take a quantum leap from our present level of activity. I mentioned to the Faculty of Arts advancement officer that a major donor had given our sister institute at the University of Washington \$5 million dollars (US, *sans doute!*) as an endowment. When she calmly asked me what we would do if someone gave our Institute the same amount (even Canadian!), I found myself launched into a process of brainstorming which will continue as 2003 ends in meetings of our faculty and community associates. Together with them, and with the steering committee of the Institute, I hope to put into the three-year plan requested by the Dean of Arts, proposals both reasonable and imaginative. I offer here only one such possibility: a fellowship program for community activists, comparable to the Southam Fellowships for journalists, which would enable them to spend six months at SFU as fellows of the Institute, nourishing their vision from the many resources which a University of our calibre has to offer.

As I re-read the letter I wrote in last year's *Bulletin*, I am gratified to realize that we have indeed taken steps in each of the areas which our workshop of last December with Kathleen Woodward, director of the above-mentioned Simpson Institute for the Humanities at the University of Washington, had recommended: an increase of funding, a raising of our profile within the University, a focus on citizenship and more involvement in community education. Please read the rest of the *Bulletin* with these concerns in mind; and please feel free to contact me directly if you have ideas of how the Institute might act upon them further, alone or in consort with other organizations of like mind and heart.

As usual, I close with greetings to the many of you with whom we have worked over this past year and with whom we hope to work again. I also wish to thank each of you who has donated to the work of the Institute, attended our programs, served on our committees, worked with other associates, written for this *Bulletin*, and in many other ways tried to strengthen our modest efforts to nourish the human in a less-than-humane time. We welcome, as last year, and, we trust, as next year, your sharing in the opportunities which the Institute seeks to offer you, in ways both engaging and engaged.

Donald Grayston, Ph.D.  
Director, Institute for the Humanities