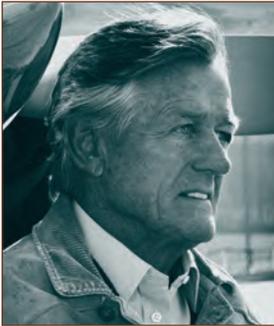




A Human Future

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Scott Griffin, OC, left his business in the mid-1990s, flew his small plane south across the Atlantic, and spent two years assisting the Flying Doctors Service of Africa. He has served on NGO boards including the AMREF International Board. In 2000 he established the Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry. In 2001, he came to the financial rescue of Canadian publishing, becoming owner and chair of House of Anansi Press. In 2010, he established Poetry in Voice, a bilingual poetry recitation competition for students.

Philanthropy: Nourishing Our Cultural Life An Interview with Scott Griffin

When we launched *A Human Future* in 2001, our goal was “to strengthen the experience of human solidarity in Canada.” Scott Griffin has lifted up the place of poetry in our society because he recognized that poetry could enhance our cultural life. A link exists between a cultural life rich in humanistic values, where the imagination is not deadened, and the propensity of people to see and respond to needs and opportunities to create a better society. Philanthropy, whether on a small or large scale, is one important outcome. – *B. Porter, ed.*

Beth Porter: In your book *My Heart is Africa*, you recount the two years you and your wife Krystyne spent in Africa and the restlessness that led you to leave the business world and a comfortable life in Toronto. You wrote: “I aspired for something nobler, something more than just making money; something was tugging at my soul.” Please describe that tugging. What did it mean for you?

Scott Griffin: We get terribly tied up in our daily lives – jobs, family, friends – all of which can be very positive; but ironically the more positive, the tighter the ties become, the more they restrict our ability to look beyond the horizon and to seek newer worlds – the very thing that leads to and nurtures our personal development. It seemed to me that it was important to try and broaden one’s own personal development by breaking those ties – lifting one’s head up and looking beyond the horizon and seeking newer worlds.

You say that during your years in Africa you underwent a transformation. You say this about yourself

and then you say it again about you and Krystyne. How did that transformation manifest?

The African experience opened our minds, stimulated our imaginations and provided insights. We saw how much we had previously relied on a materialistic world and how unimportant this was

compared to the humanistic values we found in Africa. It helped us to view the Western world with another set of eyes, bringing our former lives into better perspective and into better balance.

You say that the West ignores Africa at the risk of losing its soul, its humanity. What do we in the West need from Africa? What spiritual lessons will save our humanity?

This is a very big question. First, Africa has 54 countries, most of which are larger than

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any country in Europe, and a thousand different languages. All of the United States, China and Europe can fit into the African continent with room to spare. Of course Africa is also undergoing incredible changes with the introduction of technology. Essentially though, Africans have relied on intuition and less on logic, intuition, in my opinion, being the highest form of intelligence. It comes from being close to the land, the environment, the collective, families, the tribes, the shared living experience. In other words, our basic humanity.

You could have invested in an aid organization but you chose to endow poetry because, you said, you saw that poetry had slipped from the mainstream of our cultural life in Canada.

Is there a connection between enriching our cultural life with poetry and your concern for Africa?

I'm not sure there is a direct connection in the classic sense between strengthening Canadians' cultural life and awakening the West to Africa's needs. Having said that, a rich culture helps broaden a society to greater tolerance and understanding of the human condition. And as a consequence, one has a more charitable or better understanding of Africa, its needs and its contribution.

Poetry is the music of language. Language devoid of poetry is dead. It's so much more than the ability to simply communicate an instruction. It is the art of language which mirrors the soul. With just a few lines, poetry is able to cover the full range of human experience – the

The Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry



Tom Sandler

2015 Griffin Poetry Prize winners Jane Munro and Michael Longley with Scott Griffin (centre).

The Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry aims to spark the public's imagination and raise awareness of the crucial role poetry plays in our cultural life. The Griffin Poetry Prize is the world's largest prize for a first edition single collection of poetry written in English. Two prizes of \$65,000 are awarded annually, for the best book of poetry in English by a Canadian and for the best book of poetry in the international category, either written in English or by a Canadian translator. Winners of this year's Griffin prize, awarded on June 4, 2015, are the Vancouver-based Canadian poet Jane Munro for *Blue Sonoma* and the Irish poet Michael Longley for *The Stairwell*.

Poetry In Voice/Les voix de la poésie

Poetry In Voice is a non-profit organization founded by Scott Griffin in 2010. This bilingual competition is intended for secondary students including students in CEGEPs in Quebec. The goal of this competition is to promote the art of poetry in both the classroom and the community. *Poetry In Voice* provides an entry point for students to develop a personal relationship with poetry by learning their favourite poems by heart. It encourages them to learn about great poetry through exploration, memorization, and performance. Students choose three poems from authorized lists of poems and may compete in English or French or in both languages. This year 40,000 students competed. The *Poetry In Voice* semifinals are held online to allow schools from all over Canada equal access to the competition. The prize is awarded to three students and to their school library. In April 2015, the nine finalists competed over two days in Montreal.

[Listen to this year's Poetry in Voice student finalists \(bilingual\).](#)



same way a painting or a piece of music can. This is incredible. And it is why it's so difficult to write well.

In your family when you were a child your father recited poetry and he sometimes required you to memorize poetry. Far from turning you away from poetry this attracted you to it.

I've always been attracted to English literature generally and poetry happens to be the medium that I relate to most closely, because it illustrates the art of language in a most amazing manner.

Five years ago you established a bilingual poetry recitation competition for Canadian high school students. What are you hoping this memorizing and reciting of great poetry will do for them.

I think it's important that people recognize the beauty of language through poetry, which is the best medium. For students, it's very important to memorize poetry because that is the closest we get to fully understanding it, short of having actually written it. In addition,

being able to stand up at a microphone in front of an audience, with no notes, and recite, gives a tremendous sense of confidence to young students. And they're pretty good! It probably puts the fear of God in most adults to stand and speak to an audience without notes.

Many people may make the assumption that philanthropy is only for people of great means. What lessons have you learned from engaging in philanthropy that would be accessible to anyone?

I believe that philanthropy is a very important activity for everyone. After all, it is "giving," or charity if you like, and charity is even greater than love, for it incorporates love. And it is more fulfilling for the donor than the recipient. You largely get back more than you give, in both experience and in all kinds of more subtle rewards.

When I was president of a public company called Meridian Technology, I instituted a policy where the company would match any employee's donation to a legitimate cause, and I was amazed at the number of

The Templeton Prize



Jean Vanier and Jennifer Templeton Simpson, daughter of the late Dr. Jack Templeton (who was until recently president of the Templeton Foundation), at the British Academy in London where Jean Vanier was announced as the 2015 Templeton Prize recipient.

Established in 1972 by American financier Sir John Templeton, the Templeton Prize is one of the world's largest annual awards given to an individual. It honors a living person who has made exceptional contributions to

affirming life's spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works. Vanier joins a distinguished group of 44 earlier recipients, including Mother Teresa, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and the Dalai Lama.

In his remarks Jean Vanier commented: "Before being Christians or Jews or Muslims, before being Americans or Russians or Africans, before being generals or priests, rabbis or imams, before having visible or invisible disabilities, we are all human beings with hearts capable of loving." He has announced that the prize will go entirely to lift up the lives and reveal the unique gifts of people with intellectual disabilities in financially poor countries.

In 1987, Sir John Templeton also established the [John Templeton Foundation](#). It "serves as a philanthropic catalyst for discoveries relating to the Big Questions of human purpose and ultimate reality."



lower-paid employees who participated. I have to say, rather disappointingly, it was a much higher percentage than middle and senior management. I think the point is, philanthropy can apply at all levels, regardless of how much you have in terms of resources, and after all, it's an important aspect of most religions. ■

The McConnell Family Foundation



The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, established in 1937 by Canadian businessman and

philanthropist J.W. McConnell, is one of Canada's earliest foundations. It is a private philanthropic organization funding programs that support Canadians in building a more innovative, inclusive, sustainable, and resilient society. It supports outstanding organizations that are tackling persistent social problems through community involvement, innovative thinking and a clear commitment to building a stronger, more resilient Canada.

The Foundation supports ground-breaking endeavours in both French and English in a number of areas including social finance; reconciliation among Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples across Canada; the Cities for People initiative that is inspired in part by the urbanism work of Jane Jacobs; innovative arts programs aimed at fostering social inclusion; RECODE, which helps nurture a culture of social innovation and entrepreneurship on Canada's campuses; sustainable food and agriculture programs; and wellness among youth and children in schools.

For Your Information

- [Scott Griffin: *My Heart is Africa: A Flying Adventure*. Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2006.](#)

- [AMREF Health Africa](#)

- [On House of Anansi and Canadian Publishing](#)

On Poetry

- ["Poetry: Why is it Important?" a video of a TED talk by Scott Griffin at Bishop's University \(16 min\)](#)

- [The Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry. English/French](#)

- [Poetry in Voice student competition](#)

- [English anthology from which students chose poems](#)

- [Recitations by the 2015 student winners:](#)

- [Luna Dansereau \(French prize\)](#)

- [Olivia Perry \(English prize\)](#)

- [Mattis Savard-Verhoeven \(bilingual prize\)](#)

- [UNESCO World Poetry Day](#)

- [Poetry Foundation and Magazine \(USA\)](#)

On Philanthropy

- ["On Giving," by Kahlil Gibran](#)

- ["The Pleasure of Giving" \(a reflection on the Torah portion Vayeira, Genesis 18-22\)](#)

- ["The Pleasure of Giving," by Frans de Waal, Dutch primatologist and ethologist](#)

- [Charitable Giving: How Emotions, Peer Pressure influence Giving," a CBC report, 2013](#)

- [The Huffington Post \(Canada\) on Charitable Giving \(2015\)](#)

- [Philanthropic Foundations Canada](#)

- [Aboriginal Philanthropy in Canada](#)

www.larche.ca/en/inspiration



The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 147 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 29 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with intellectual disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.

A Human Future is offered as a contribution to the Canadian conversation about values and the fostering of a society where everyone belongs and can make a contribution.