

# ***HEART-TO-HEART***

November, 1996

A Pastoral Letter From Richard J. Foster



Dear Friends,

I have been struggling to find a clever way to begin this essay that at least would delay the knee-jerk dismissal of my concern as hopelessly dated, completely out of step with the realities of modern communication technologies, and, worst of all, dangerously elitist. Lacking a clever opening, however, I shall simply blurt it out: *I am concerned that our reading and our writing is gravitating to the lowest common denominator so completely that the great themes of majesty and nobility and felicity are made to seem trite, puny, pedestrian.*

See, I warned you that this would sound elitist, or at best simply a matter of personal preference. But I assure you that my concern is miles away from such things. In reality, I am concerned about the state of the soul in the midst of all the cheap sensory overload going on today. You see, without what Alfred North Whitehead called "an habitual vision of greatness", our soul will shrivel up and lose the capacity for beauty and mystery and transcendence.

Can you stay with me long enough so I can fill in my concern a little? Then you can decide for yourself whether it has merit or is just the prattling of an old sentimentalist who likes musty libraries.

## **Substance Counts**

I am constantly amazed how the "people of the Book" so cavalierly toss words about. Words matter. Ideas matter. To write and read on themes of substance matters. Frankly, many books today have all the tell-tale signs of regurgitated pablum. In this day and age having nothing at all to say does not disqualify a person from writing a book. The sad truth is that many authors simply have never learned to reflect substantively on anything. (How well I know that everything said here I must take to heart myself, double and triple.)

It is no secret how to write a best seller in the contemporary religious marketplace. Simply play to the human need market, mask the hard call of the Gospel, and give people the sun, the moon, and the stars in four simple laws or five easy steps. It also helps to tap into the fears of people by connecting all these things to a conspiracy theory or two.

Friends, substance is important. Amy Carmichael writes, "It matters a good deal that your book-food should be strong meat. We are what we think about. Think about trivial things or weak things and somehow one loses fiber and becomes flabby in spirit." You see, if we give our attention to tabloid thinking and the peddlers of gossip, we become small, petty souls. But if we give sustained attention to the great themes of the human spirit—life and death, transcendence, the problem of evil, the human predicament, the greatness of rightness, and much more—the

windows of the soul will open to the invigorating breezes of splendor and valor and courtesy and magnanimity.

Some Christians today are beginning to rediscover the novel. We can be glad for the interest, but pitfalls abound. Much that passes today under the rubric of "Christian fiction" is either Harlequin romances with a few moral lessons sprinkled on top or religious propaganda tracts put into story form.

One publisher unabashedly explained to me that their line of fiction did indeed have a formula—"gutter to the cross". Fortunately, this individual seemed totally oblivious to the shock, horror, and gut-wrenching revulsion that shook me from head to toe as I replied lamely, "That's nice". Frankly, we would do better to go back to the first novelists—they were nearly all Christian—and allow them to drag us out of our cramped, little world of TV soaps with their Xerox plots and usher us into a vast universe of majesty and terror and sublimity. Once having read the masters, our eyes will be sharper and our ears more attuned to the good, the true, the beautiful. Then we can more fruitfully return to modern novelists.

(You may be wondering why I am not addressing such media as radio, TV, and the like. The answer is simple: I am not qualified to do so and, therefore, must defer to those who are professionals in these fields. Besides, while radio is the most pervasive medium in our culture and TV has the greatest impact, writing is the most precise medium, and, when done correctly, controls what happens on both radio and TV.)

### **The Crisp, The Clear, The Imaginative**

But it isn't just the substance of what we say (or write or read or hear or see) that concerns me. It is the way we say it. To write pedantically about radiance or infinity or ubiquity stunts the mind and cramps the soul. To find the right word, to capture the perfect image awakens the spirit and enlarges the soul.

Mark Twain noted that the difference between the right word and the almost right word is like the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. I ask you, How can we be so at ease with linguistic lightning bugs when our universe sparkles with such wonder and splendor and unmanageable ambiguity? How can we who have experienced the Word become flesh be so flippant with words? How can we . . . . How dare we!

Oscar Wilde once commented that his day had been particularly strenuous: he had spent all morning taking out a comma, and all afternoon putting it back in. Unfortunately, most contemporary writers hardly care which *noun* they use, and *punctuation* is completely off their radar screen.

Do you think I am speaking only to writers in all this? By no means! Readers have a prime-time obligation to demand better. It is your soul that is being stunted. I urge you, gentle reader, rise up and stand against the tide of monosyllabic mediocrity. Complain, resist, reject the dumbing down, elementary-school simplification of the works that hit our best-seller lists with monotonous regularity. Speak out and tell us how insulting it is that we pitch our message so low. Give voice to your love of words—how you love their sound and rhythm, how you love their

meaning and history. Declare your abhorrence of the cheap sentence that prostitutes words for the purpose of propaganda. Tell us how words that are animated with love and terror and pity and pain and wonder make your life dangerous and great and bearable.

### **Cultural Lift**

One more aspect of my concern. I care about cultural lift, and my guess is that you do, too. The bastardizing of language carries with it the degeneration of culture. If all writing focuses on reaching people "where they are", we have done precious little for them. We must also seek to lift people from where they are to where they can become. Writing is more than communication; it also educates and enriches and beckons us to new vistas. For several centuries the King James Bible (bursting as it was with the linguistic brilliance of the Elizabethan Age) exerted a centripetal, unifying, and lifting force on religious and social discourse. William Shakespeare did the same thing as a dramatist, as did John Milton as a poet, and Samuel Johnson as an essayist.

The ancient Hebrew prophets cared enough about their message that they frequently delivered it in poetic form. May new prophets arise in our day that will call us to faithful living in words that are crisp and clear and imaginative.

And they are rising. Change is in the air. The dumbing down of the mind is not the wave of the future. The human spirit will endure today's gossip-laden trivial pursuit for only so long. We are created for more, and with centripetal force we will push toward the more dense, the more real, the more substantive. (God, the Divine Center, is the heart of this pursuit, of course, and, as he said through the prophet Jeremiah, "you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart".)

But change is not a foregone conclusion. The forces arrayed against cultural lift are substantial. With regard to words, perhaps the most hostile influence is talk radio where words are cheap, volume is valued over logic, and truth is not even a consideration.

### **OUR FINANCIAL GUIDELINES**

- We urge everyone to give first to their local church (or wherever they are being nurtured spiritually) and to the poor before ever giving to RENOVARÉ.
- An accountant oversees our financial records in accord with accepted accounting procedures and the highest professionalism.
- We will live within our means. One thing we refuse to do is overextend and overspend ourselves and then beg for God's people to bail us out. We believe that God will give us the money to do what we are being called to do. We feel it involves just as much faith to trust God for the money before a purchase as after a purchase. In fact, one way we discern God's will for the ministry of RENOVARÉ is through the financial support of his people.
- We believe in full disclosure at all times. Our financial reports are available to anyone upon request.
- We will receipt all donations.
- If we offer books, tapes, or other materials for a suggested contribution, we will receipt the amount given above the retail price of the product plus shipping and handling costs.
- When we make a purchase, we will pay the bill within thirty days. We refuse to subsidize this ministry on the backs of vendors.
- We will never sell or rent our mailing list.
- We are primarily a voluntary organization and as such we depend in large measure upon the sacrificial labors of many. If, however, we employ paid staff, they will receive equal pay for equal work.
- We will communicate our financial needs to our constituency as clearly and as truthfully as possible. We will not inflate or overstate our situation, nor create a crisis to boost income.
- We believe RENOVARÉ was initiated and continues to be sustained by God. While we are eager to follow the Divine whisper at every turn and work with all our might, it is God's business and not ours to prosper or end the work of RENOVARÉ. We rejoice either way.

**Praxis**

So what can you and I do? Allow me three simple suggestions that can be implemented immediately.

- Read. The brain is a muscle and without exercise it will atrophy. We can exercise our brains in many ways, of course, but reading is certainly a good place to start.
- Read two old books for every modern one. The old writers have a track record—they have proven themselves to be valuable. It will take a century or two until we will know if recent writers, like myself, will endure. (By the by, "contemporary classic"—a term used more and more by publishers nowadays—is an oxymoron, and we should disallow its use.)
- Read after and value our good poets. In an ocean of phonologic babble, they are little islands of light, preserving for our culture a love of language. Good poetry gives us an economy and density of words which, image for image, sound for sound, word for word, represents the purest possible product of the fiercest refining heat.

Finally, in the midst of these high-minded ideals, I want to encourage you to be easy on yourself. Take the long view. Start with something that will lift your heart and hone your mind, and stay with it for a while. It is far better to soak in five pages of substance than to read five hundred pages of fluff. Your life will be richer for the effort.

Peace and joy,



Richard J. Foster

P.S. I have promised to keep you informed of our financial status. It has been eighteen months since we asked for monies to replenish our reserves, and as of this writing they are dangerously low. We need \$26,000.00 in order for us to continue our work with integrity. Fortunately, several friends of RENOVARÉ have set before us a \$13,000.00 matching challenge gift. Therefore, every dollar you give to this work in the days ahead will be matched, thus doubling the good you do us. If RENOVARÉ has helped you, will you consider a generous gift to this ministry now? Thank you. – RJF

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