

**Excerpt from *The Compassionate Imagination*  
by Max Wyman**



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# THE COMPASSIONATE IMAGINATION

How the arts are central in  
a functioning democracy

MAX WYMAN



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For Susan Margaret Mertens, without whom ...

*The way to freedom and order in the future will lie through art and poetry. Only imagination, discovering man's self and his relation to the world and to other men, can save him from complete enslavement to the state, to machinery, the base dehumanized life which is already spreading around us.*

— Louis Dudek, from his introductory essay in *Cerberus*, a collection of poems by Dudek, Raymond Souster, and Irving Layton, the first publication of Contact Press, Montréal, 1952.

## A personal note before we begin ...

AUGUST 2013. AN ordinary enough call. Our family doctor wanted me to come in to discuss the results of my recent routine blood test.

He sat me down and showed me the charts. The readings showed that I probably had Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia. This was not necessarily bad, he said; CCL is very slow growing, and no treatment was recommended, just “watchful waiting.” Still, leukemia? Hmm.

He sent me for more blood tests, which suggested a different form of leukemia. He sent me for a liver and spleen ultrasound and referred me to an oncologist. The oncologist and several of her specialist colleagues looked at my tests and scans and decided I had lymphoma, a form of blood cancer (they were unable to pin down a precise definition: lymphomas come in about fifty different varieties). A biopsy confirmed that the lymphoma was in the bone marrow. Normally, a cancer that reaches the bone marrow is considered Stage Four, the worst of all the stages, but blood cancers don't form tumours in the way other cancers do. In any case, they were pretty sure it was “indolent” (a common medical term, apparently) rather than aggressive, so they would monitor it with monthly blood tests. A precise diagnosis was still unavailable. If the blood numbers became problematic or I became more symptomatic they would start treatment.

When I asked the oncologist for the survival chances in a worst-case scenario she said “years.” My wife Susan took

that as doctor code for one or two years, but my later reading suggested that if it's caught early, survival rates are six to eight years.

Still, cancer? It was like dropping a watermelon onto concrete: everything scatters, wet bits everywhere, hard to pick up. For a while I couldn't think straight. I wasn't sure what was real and what was dream.

In the immediate aftermath of the diagnosis I wrote a little quatrain:

I'm seventy-four and I've got cancer  
There go my plans to be a dancer  
Life's big question, now I know the answer  
It's heigh ho and off you go

Heigh ho and off you go. It was gallows humour, nothing more. I didn't believe that bleak message about life's pointlessness, not for a moment. The key word about the diagnosis, after all, was indolent. The lymphoma was lying in wait, taking its time. Lamentation and the rending of garments would do nothing to help.

I named the disease The Grim Creeper and started to write this book. It was time to try to extract something useful from what life had taught me.

— M.W., Lions Bay. March 2023.

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# Overture

*In music, an opening statement that often refers  
to themes explored later.*

*Also: an invitation to participate.*

I CALL THIS book *The Compassionate Imagination* because after more than fifty years watching Canadian creativity come into glorious flower, I am convinced that the arts and culture — in general, and in Canada specifically — have a unique power to reawaken our sense of decency and empathy toward one another and to regenerate a sense of common purpose in our increasingly splintered existence.

Like it or not, we are at the end of the world as we knew it. The COVID-19 pandemic shook loose everything we thought was stable in society — health, work, community, family, friendship — and woke us all to the need for fundamental, systemic change. The systems under which we have operated are out of balance and close to toppling: the rich continue to get richer; the poor, poorer; the weather worse; and forests are burning at a faster rate than at any time in recorded history. Too many factors make us feel we have nothing in

common: social media, political differences, economic disparities, tribalism. The old *cordon sanitaire* of Canadian decency and diffidence is fraying to the snapping point. Mutual trust has evaporated like the morning dew. We shout when we should be listening.

In a world where political, social, and economic polarities are becoming more and more sharply defined, where democracy and autocracy are pitted in a global battle for control of the way we live, it is time to rebalance our moral and spiritual priorities. Any hope we might have for a return to the world as it was (or how we remember it to have been, which is not necessarily the same thing) is mere whistling in the wind. Institutions need to be reshaped. Inequities demand remediation. Justice systems must be recalibrated. We need a vision of a world beyond the balance sheet, beyond the creeping normalization of greed and mistrust: a vision that is not only functional, something we are prepared to settle for, but inspirational, something to which we can aspire.

However we might act or speak, we all have an understanding of our interconnectedness. We know that what binds us is stronger than what divides us. We all have within us the capacity to care. And it's impossible not to see the shifts that occur in our understanding of human existence as we build wisdom on knowledge and experience. A generation ago, for instance, we treated addiction as a moral failing. Today, we see it as a medical condition and, seeing it through a different lens, marshal our resources in a different way to deal with it — and in doing so make the world a better place. Change of that kind is part of a rising tide of concern — the Me Too movement, Black Lives Matter, climate activism, the rights of

girls and women — for the less material aspects of our lives and the lives of others. Movements like this, and the growing popularity of mindfulness and other meditative practices, reflect our search for meaning and decency in our world and our lives, the desire that many feel to jettison what is obsolete and rediscover the relevance of the human particular. To act with compassion.

But change on the scale the world needs now, in the manner we need now, won't happen until we ratchet down the anger and the fear, dismantle the barriers between us, and find again that middle ground of generosity and shared humanity where we can come together to imagine a better, more inclusive, more humane society. It is time to call on the best within us: Lincoln's better angels of our nature, the human condition at its noblest. It is time for a change of heart.

Art lets us sense the pulse of human commonality that throbs beneath the surface of our days. It tells us that difference is not something to fear. It fosters fellow-feeling and engenders compassion. It cuts through the wall of ego and privilege that we allow to separate us from our better selves. It puts us back in touch with the empathy, decency, and care I believe we were born with.

This book lays out a solid framework of advocacy and argument on which to build a new Canadian Cultural Contract between the government of Canada and the people it serves, affirming art and culture as the humanizing core of Canadian civil society and an essential public service, and embedding in public policy art's unique and deeply human properties of imaginative exploration and emotional and spiritual enrichment.

Ginger groups from Canada's cultural sector have lobbied for years for the creation of a national Ministry of Culture, on the same level of influence as the ministries that oversee other portfolios Canadians consider important. But however much they murmur encouraging words about the economic and social benefits of what they insist on calling the "cultural industries," our political leaders have historically had an uneasy relationship with the arts and culture. They make me think of Victorian captains of industry, fingering their collars and stroking their mustachios as they slip the annoying child a coin or two and send it off to play. They pay dutiful lip service to the importance of culture as part of our national fabric. They make sure the sector gets resources sufficient for basic survival, though it has been argued that this is a deliberate strategy to keep cultural workers on starvation rations so they don't get ideas above their station. Politicians send our artists and their creations off around the world to polish our image as a civilized partner in the choreography of soft power. They put them on our postage stamps. During the pandemic, they even coughed up a little extra to help the arts sector counter the crippling effects of the economic shutdown.

But none of them has grasped the central nettle, which is the need to see the arts and culture not as a frill, not as an outlier, not as a tool, but as a central and necessary element of our nationhood. In the prosperous and educated world of rationality and accountability that the Enlightenment bequeathed us, and which our governments claim to perpetuate, the artist is an outsider, the supplicant conjuror with his begging bowl. (The former director of the Canadian Opera Company, the late Richard Bradshaw, one of the most vociferous advocates

for substantial increases to public arts funding, used to try to shame the federal government into action by pointing out that the entire budget for the Canada Council for the Arts was roughly equal to the amount received by the three opera companies in Berlin, whose residents also had access to 7 orchestras, 50 theatres, 170 museums, and 300 galleries.)

Crisis, however, has a way of clarifying the mind; in the wake of the tectonic social, political, and economic shocks of the first two decades of this new century we may find ourselves ready in surprisingly large numbers to reconsider the way we prioritize and support our social systems.

The new Canadian Cultural Contract will rehumanize our ways of living together by reactivating the compassion and understanding that is stirred when we make and share art, allowing us to:

- Liberate the power of the collaborative imagination, by giving the visionary ferment of Canada's diverse creative community a place at the decision-making table as we seek solutions to the stark challenges of our time.
- Achieve a far more equitable spreading of the cultural wealth, in the form of expanded granting programs and an individual cultural credit that will empower all Canadians to enjoy the richness of our cultural expression.
- Ensure that Indigenous ways of knowing and creating are integrated into the decision-making and funding processes.
- Rebalance the scales of our education systems, affirming the role of the humanities alongside the sciences in educating the whole person, turning STEM into STEAM by adding an A for the Arts.

At the operational core of this new contract will be the Canadian Foundation for Culture: an arm's-length structure that will serve as the coordinating and resource hub for the strands that make up the Canadian cultural tapestry. Infusing its spirit will be a commitment to the democratization of the arts — or, if that is too political a term, to the enrichment of society through the general availability and appreciation of everything that cultural engagement can bring to the individual life.

The principal reason why there is so little political and public appetite for funding the arts is because for generations, our children — and the adults they become — have not been given the necessary tools to understand the arts, the reasons to appreciate them, or the encouragement to engage with them. The result is a persistent disconnect: the idea that culture is a connoisseur's club you can't get into without the right credentials. This sense of exclusion is by no means as strongly felt as it once was — the days of city councillors objecting to using public money to support “galloping galoots in their underwear,” as once happened when a grant application from the Royal Winnipeg Ballet came before the Winnipeg municipal council, have long gone. But we still have far to go.

Developing an informed and engaged audience is part and parcel of a cultural policy — in fact, it's essential to it. A motivating force for the new Canadian Cultural Contract is the need to cultivate broad public taste for what culture can provide — not by making vanilla statements about art's significance, but by demonstrating practically what the benefits are for the individual and making those benefits available to all. Experience shows that while many people are ready to

express their admiration and enthusiasm for art, far fewer follow through by buying a book or a painting or a theatre ticket — or even naming culture as a spending priority at election time. But, as Walt Whitman wrote, “To have great poets there must be great audiences, too.” Great audiences are built by welcoming them.

The new Canadian Cultural Contract will ensure that Canadians will be encouraged and enabled to engage with art and culture: as audience members, of course, but also, to the extent that they feel inclined, as creative individuals. We have allowed a line to be drawn between professionalism in the arts and the art we make for personal pleasure. But, like so much in life that we try to reduce to an either-or choice, these forms of art are not polar opposites.

I’ll never be a serious professional actor (though I have performed bit parts in television and movies), my likelihood of playing Chopin in public is nil (though I studied piano assiduously as a child), and my sole foray into public dance performance was as an exemplar of the non-dancer (in a production called *The Show Must Go On*, by the French choreographer Jérôme Bel). You would be right to think of me as a mere dabbler, an amateur at best, but, my goodness, how much poorer my life would have been without the encouragement and guidance I was given when young, the availability and access that I found as I grew up, and the insight and understanding that exposure to the creative imaginations of others have given me.

I am far from alone, and my argument here is a simple one: everyone should be given the opportunity to experience the richness of personal self-realization allowed by engagement

with art. In the age of TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, we do ourselves no favours by excluding amateurs and community groups from the big cultural picture. Of course there is a difference between the serious artist and the Sunday painter, but they are both important, and the interests of both should be recognized and honoured.

This does not for a moment diminish the importance of professionalism. Later I will argue that a clear line of distinction must be drawn between professional arts critics and the amateur enthusiasts whose opinions are available in overwhelming profusion on social media. I support anyone's right to have an opinion, but if you present yourself as a critic, you must buttress that opinion with persuasive evidence and argument that goes beyond a five-star rating and a thumbs-up emoji. The fact that this is precisely what today's consumers demand is another argument for giving consumers better access to, understanding of, and comfort with the art form on which they are offering their opinions. It's a moral imperative as well as a political one; and the solutions reach far deeper than a superficial affirmation that art is good for you. Everyone should have the fullest possible opportunity to exercise their right to enjoyment of the arts in whatever manner they see fit. In some cases, it is not about making art at all, but rather simply the expression of what Vancouver playwright Marcus Youssef calls "the unmediated, non-idealized versions of ourselves in all our complexity."

Arguments are sometimes made that we need to slice the cultural funding cake in a different way, so that smaller communities as well as the major centres, and underfunded cultural minorities, get a fairer share. But recent experience



in the UK suggests that simple decentralization and redistribution of funds isn't necessarily the answer. In 2022, Arts Council England (ACE), which makes its funding decisions supposedly at arm's-length from government, was ordered by the Conservative government to reduce support for organizations in the capital, London, by fifteen percent. This was to ensure, as then-culture secretary Nadine Dorries explained, "that everyone, wherever they live, has the opportunity to enjoy the incredible benefits of culture in their lives." The move was part of a four-year "levelling up" agenda meant to counter growing discontent with the UK's economic and social imbalances. The resulting cuts by ACE included the withdrawal of all funding from the London-based English National Opera and several London theatre companies. This deliberate, political thinning out of cultural choice for Londoners in order to spread it more thickly in the provinces — robbing Peter to pay Paul — drew an outraged response from the cultural community, which was being shown in real time just how precarious its existence was and how arbitrary the decisions on its future were. Dorries later called the decision to cut the ENO "a stunt ... lazy and political ... If there ever was a case for arm's-length bodies to be brought under political control, ACE have just made it." The ENO was later given a funding reprieve but told to start planning for a new base outside London by 2026.

"Levelling up" power and resources is an admirable aim, and one we should certainly pursue in Canada. But if we truly believe in "the incredible benefits of culture" in our lives, the more logical approach is the addition of resources, rather than a redistribution of the same small pot. How much

more admirable it would be if the UK government had said, “We recognize the inequities that you’re trying to remedy, we share your vision of the importance of art and culture in our world: here’s an extra bundle of cash to help you do it.”

This holistic vision of art as a necessary component of our individual lives, accessible to us all, is the animating pulse of this book. It flows from the firm conviction that it is through the rich and exuberant tumult of our shared imaginations that we discover who we are and explore what we want to do and who we want to be, and that through that shared imagination we will reprioritize the decency and empathy that is at the core of all that is best about the complicated human business of living together.