

IDEAS

for a
New
Century

Edited by
BERNIE LUCHT



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Goose Lane Editions
Suite 330, 500 Beaverbrook Court
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CANADA E3B 5X4
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The “Idea” of the Interview

There’s never been a form of human communication more overhyped and less understood than “the interview.”

Interviews are generally considered to be a crucial activity for anybody involved in the profession of journalism. In fact, they’re widely believed to be the basic tool of our trade. Reporters are supposed to get to the truth about a story by interviewing participants and questioning eyewitnesses. But different types of stories require different approaches. What, for example, does a cub reporter standing on a front porch in the suburbs say to the parents of a very recent teenaged fatality, all the while knowing that the basic aim is to get a photograph from the family album for the next day’s front page? Does that extremely painful process have anything in common with the task of asking prominent thinkers and intellectuals abstract questions about the meaning of life?

As a broadcaster, I’ve frankly never considered interviewing to rank among my strengths. I’ve often said, “I’m not good at interviews.” In my work as a documentary maker, I’ve always viewed the interviewing process as something not unlike what Winston Churchill once said about democracy: it’s a flawed system, but it’s the best we have. Ultimately, it’s the only way to gather raw material. That

doesn't mean that it's perfect. Interviews can sometimes be surprisingly stimulating. They can also be mind-numbingly boring. Major consolation comes from the hope that most of the dross will ultimately end up on the editing room floor. So, when I'm interviewing anybody for a documentary, I usually let them finish their sentences. As a basic rule, I try not to interrupt. I'll challenge people, for sure, but my fundamental aim is to get them to say what *they* want to say. I encourage them to tell *their* story, howsoever *they* want to tell it.

In the end, my documentary background makes me believe that an interview should be no more complicated than a simple conversation with another human being. Conversation involves talking. Talking implies listening. It's all pretty fundamental, really, although often overhyped and frequently misunderstood. Interviews may be a far from perfect, but they are one of the best tools that we have for understanding each other...

PAUL KENNEDY

Toronto, August 2008

Introduction

The CBC Radio program *Ideas* went on the air in October 1965. In October 2005, we marked the program's fortieth anniversary by publishing *Ideas: Brilliant Thinkers Speak Their Minds*, a compilation of thoughts of some of the great minds who appeared on the program during its first four decades. In this second volume, *Ideas for a New Century*, we present a selection of interviews broadcast on *Ideas* during the not-quite-finished first decade of the new millennium.

For the first months of its life, the program we now know as *Ideas* was called *The Best Ideas You'll Hear Tonight*. It was founded by two CBC program organizers: Phyllis Webb, a West Coast poet who had come east to Montreal to work at McGill University and then moved on to the CBC in Toronto; and Bill Young, an American who had come to Canada as a graduate student and studied with Marshall McLuhan. Phyllis had been in charge of a lecture series called *University of the Air*. Bill produced a series called *The Learning Stage*. The CBC, looking for ways to save money, encouraged the producers of programs with similar mandates to consider amalgamating their efforts. Phyllis and Bill proposed combining their programs to create *The Best Ideas You'll Hear Tonight*, and the new program was born.

Since its very beginning, *Ideas* has been firmly rooted in the trad-

Since its very beginning, *Ideas* has been firmly rooted in the traditions of adult education. On the night the program was launched, it was described as “the new look in CBC educational broadcasting” and “radio for the mind.” Over its long life, the show has continued to nurture its relationship with academia and scholarship, but it has shifted its approach to an emphasis on feature documentary journalism.

Ideas underlie every aspect of our lives. They shape how we think and speak about the world, how we behave, how we see ourselves, individually and in society. *Ideas* drive the imagination; they frame the ways in which we conceive the past, the present, and the future; they inform our political and social arrangements, our arts and culture, science, technology, and religion, our personal relationships and beliefs.

Ideas, the program, is an unending work-in-progress. As a production team, we continually struggle with who we are and what we are trying to achieve, working in a world of exponential change. I use four adjectives to describe the ideal *Ideas* program. The first is “insightful”: I hope that listeners will learn something they didn’t know before, or think differently about something they did know. The second adjective is “eclectic”: this is our goal in our choice of subjects, variety of contributors, and genres of presentation.

The third adjective I use to describe *Ideas* is my favourite: “resonant.” As CBC programmers, we have talked for years about the importance of being relevant: you have to be relevant or people won’t pay attention, and you’ll fade away into irrelevance. It is hard to argue with that. But, in thinking about this in connection with *Ideas*, I began to feel that “relevant” was overused and at risk of losing its meaning along the way. “Resonant,” however, seemed to me to extend and deepen the idea of relevance. The *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* defines resonance as “the reinforcement or prolongation of sound by reflection or synchronous vibration.” Synchronous vibration — that’s what I hope the best *Ideas* programs create in our listeners. Great works of art help us discover truths that reside deep within us, truths that are felt but not articulated; the words of the poet, the notes of the composer, the brushstrokes of the painter reach

out and give voice to a truth within us, with an effect that can be electrifying. In its own way, *Ideas* aspires to do no less.

The fourth adjective I use is “delightful”: I want *Ideas* shows to be a pleasure to listen to — to be both informative and entertaining.

Most *Ideas* programs are documentaries: journalistic compositions that draw on a variety of sources — interviews, sounds, actuality — and mix and match them to tell a story and explore an idea. Over the course of a season, however, we also produce a number of hour-long feature interviews. Unlike a documentary, an interview allows you to spend time ranging over the life, thought, and work of a single individual. This collection of interviews broadcast on *Ideas* is organized into four broad themes: “The Culture of Society,” “Canada and the World,” “The Eye, the Word, and the Ear,” and “Futures.” Apart from these thematic divisions are two interviews about the nature of ideas that serve as bookends for the rest of the collection.

The book begins, appropriately, with the words of the brilliant and erudite Lister Sinclair, who was the host of *Ideas* from 1983 until 1999. His ideas, gathered in a series of extended interviews conducted over a number of months during the final years of his career by *Ideas* producer Sara Wolch, are a meditation on thought, creativity, and imagination. He draws on some of intellectual and cultural figures that most influenced him: Darwin, Einstein, Goethe, Molière, Mozart, Newton, Shakespeare, among others. “I’ve been influenced,” he says, “to try and see what everybody has seen and then think what nobody has thought.”

The British political philosopher John Gray, author of *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, opens “The Culture of Society.” Although many people in the Western world like to think of themselves as secular, Gray argues that secularism itself has been shaped by ideas that have come from religion: history can be seen as a story of moral redemption, a struggle between good and evil that good actually can win. But, he cautions, human beings are imperfectible. Science and technology may be inherently progressive, but ethics and politics are not. We are still dealing with age-old human impulses, needs, and flaws. Perhaps the best we can do is work out reasonable ways of living with each other.

“The Culture of Society” also includes interviews with Mark Lilla, the New York-based historian of ideas; Theodore Dalrymple, retired British psychiatrist, social critic, and self-described “vulgarity correspondent”; Jerome Kagan, the Harvard developmental psychologist; Elliot Aronson, the eminent US researcher on cognitive dissonance; and Leonore Tiefer, educator, therapist, and specialist on male and female sexuality.

“Canada and the World” begins with Donald Savoie holder of the Clément-Cormier Chair in Economic Development at the Université de Moncton and one of Canada’s most distinguished experts on public administration. Savoie addresses what he sees as a breakdown in the way the federal government functions. More than a hundred years ago, a bargain — an unwritten agreement, rather than part of the Constitution — was struck outlining the roles of Parliament, the prime minister and cabinet, and public servants. Savoie says that “MPs knew their role. It was to hold government accountable. It was not to govern... [T]hat bargain’s come unglued.”

In February 2007, the Conference Board of Canada released a massive report, *Mission Possible: Sustainable Prosperity for Canada*, which warned that Canada’s economic performance was slipping compared with that of other industrialized countries and recommended steps we needed to take to achieve sustainable prosperity. Shortly after the report was released, *Ideas* interviewed the president of the Conference Board of Canada, Anne Golden, who discusses its main findings and argues that Canada must excel in the global economy, in the intelligent use of our resources, and in the way our cities function.

“Canada and the World” concludes with an interview with Louise Arbour, who retired in 2008 as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. She had come to the role after serving on the Supreme Court of Canada and, before that, as chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. In 2005, she delivered the annual Lafontaine-Baldwin Lecture in Quebec City on the theme of Canada and human rights. In her interview, which is based on that lecture, she laments that

Canada, a democratic and wealthy country that is respected internationally for its support of traditional freedoms, civil liberties, and human rights still wrestles with persistent domestic poverty. Arbour argues that Canada has been reluctant to embrace social and economic rights and wonders when we will move “from charity to entitlement.”

“The Eye, the Word, and the Ear” begins with Mary Pratt, the eminent painter and printmaker and resident of Newfoundland and Labrador. *Ideas* interviewed her in early 2007, the year Canada Post issued a stamp in her honour. She has been described as “a visual poet of femaleness.” Her interview is full of self-revelation. She recalls her first visual memory and talks about how her childhood experiences of light and colour have influenced her work.

Quite different is the Salish artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. His work illustrates the political, cultural, and environmental concerns facing Aboriginal peoples today. He is driven by rage. His imagery is striking and disturbing. Yuxweluptun documents, in his own words, “contemporary indigenous history in large-scale paintings.”

“Futures” consists of interviews with Stewart Brand and Ray Kurzweil, prominent futurists who have helped to shape the world we live in and how we see it. Both continue to amaze and inspire.

Stewart Brand believes that human progress is best served through decentralized technologies, which allow people the freedom to shape a world that is socially and environmentally sustainable. In 1966, he campaigned to have NASA release a satellite photograph of Earth as seen from space. The photo, he said, “gave the sense that the Earth’s an island, surrounded by a lot of inhospitable space.” But Brand is probably best known for having created the *Whole Earth Catalogue* in 1968, which he hoped would “catalyze the emergence of a realm of personal power.” Today, he is president of The Long Now Foundation, which he established with musician, composer, and record producer Brian Eno in “01996” to “creatively foster long-term thinking and responsibility in the framework of the next 10,000 years.” “What do I actually do?” Brand writes, “I find things and I found things.”

Ray Kurzweil is a genius. An engineer, inventor, and futurist, he invented the first omni-font character recognition system, the first print-to-speech reading machine for the blind, the first CCD flat-bed scanner, and the first music synthesizer that could faithfully reproduce the sounds of many orchestral instruments. In his 2005 book, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, Kurzweil suggests that through what he calls “the law of accelerating returns,” we are moving toward a “singularity” — a future period, within the lifetimes of most of us today — when the pace of technological development will utterly and irreversibly transform human life.

The book closes with an interview with Peter Watson, a British journalist, researcher, and author of *Ideas: A History from Fire to Freud*. Watson talks about three great ideas and one bad one. I’ll leave it to him to tell you what they are.

I want to end with a few words of thanks: to Susanne Alexander, publisher of Goose Lane Editions, for her enthusiastic support for this project; Barry Norris, for his meticulous copy-editing; and Julie Scriver, for the book’s beautiful design. The CBC’s Ian Godfrey, Mike Housego, and Nancy Millar transcribed the broadcast audio; without their front-line work, the radio interviews would never have made it to the page. Finally, I owe a special debt of gratitude to my colleagues at *Ideas*, whose work is featured in this book. Each day they bring their brilliance, their insights, and a ferocious commitment to the task of imagining and creating the *Ideas* program: our host Paul Kennedy, and producers Richard Handler, Mary O’Connell, Sean Prpick, Dave Redel, and Sara Wolch. I hope you enjoy the result.

BERNIE LUCHT

Toronto, August 2008



ONE

What Is an Idea?

LISTER SINCLAIR

On January 9, 2002, Lister Sinclair, who hosted Ideas for sixteen years, turned eighty-one. Mathematician, dramatist, musicologist, actor, director, producer, critic, birder, teacher, author, and sports nut, Lister was no dabbler but a master in every one of those fields. He was also in broadcasting for almost sixty years. Some of the best radio plays and documentaries ever put on radio and television were written and produced by Lister. He had more honorary degrees and awards than one person has a right to, and he was one of the most polite, touchingly vulnerable, and genuinely gracious guys one could ever meet, with one of the most beguiling voices ever heard on the radio. Lister's long-time colleague and friend, Ideas producer Sara Wolch talked with him about his ideas and his influences. A longer version of this interview with Lister Sinclair was broadcast on 10, 23, and 30 January 2002.

SARA WOLCH

As I sit here looking at you, a man I've worked with and admired for twenty years, I'm thinking, where on earth do we begin?

LISTER SINCLAIR

I think that it doesn't really matter too much where you start, because sooner or later you'll get to all the other pieces. One nice little

parlour trick that mathematicians like to do is to get a strip of paper, glue the two ends together and give it a half-turn as you do it, and that makes what's called a Möbius strip. Möbius was a mathematician who spotted this, and the point about a Möbius strip is that it looks very much as if it's got two sides, the front and back, but it doesn't. If you run your finger along it, you discover that you keep changing from one side to another as you go along. So a Möbius strip is an interesting thing: start anywhere and you always wind up on the other side. And I think my life has been a Möbius strip. I start somewhere and wind up in the exact opposite.

Very often, when people think about something being creative, they look forward to having their eyes opened onto a completely new world. Well, that's very nice when it happens. It's not happened very often to me. What has happened to me very often, however, is that somebody has opened my eyes onto the same old world, and I've realized there was nothing "same old" about it. In other words, I've been influenced to try and see what everybody has seen and then think what nobody has thought. Somebody actually said that specifically, a guy whom I greatly admire: Albert Szent-Györgyi — St. George in Hungarian. He won the Nobel Prize in 1937 for medicine. He's the guy who first identified that there were such things as vitamins and that Vitamin C actually existed. He was finally able to isolate and get a specimen of Vitamin C, and that's pretty big news. And what he had done was he'd tried to see what everyone had seen and then think what nobody had thought.

SW: So, to see the same old thing with fresh eyes.

LS: Yes. Then it's no longer the same old thing. Out the window goes the "same old" right away. The whole world is then endlessly fresh and new. I can give you a musical example — it's getting on for two hundred years ago. Paganini, the great violinist — he was such a strange, dramatic figure — devised a whole series of little tunes, one of which he thought he could make variations on. And everybody else thought they could make variations on it, too. Incidentally, I once put together a tape, just for my own entertainment, of variations on