Remarks by Charles Champlin, Humanitas Prize luncheon July 7, 1977

Early in his remarkable tenure at St. Peters, a friend of mine wrote an article for LIFE on Pope John. The editors loved it, but they sent a cable to my friend saying, "Hey, wait a minute, nobody can be this totally and unmitigatedly perfect. There must be some little thing, some tiny frailty, you know...." How you shrug your shoulders and trail off in a cablegram I'm not sure, but that's what the editors did.

My friend Dodie Hamblin saw the point and agreed with it. She went back to one of her sources, one of those wise and ancient Roman cardinals and explained the problem. He saw the point and agreed with it. "Yes, yes," he said, "John does sound too perfect to be true. But what is there that one can say is frail about him, an imperfection?" The cardinal thought a minute and said, shrugging his shoulders at the triviality of it, "Well, of course, what you could say, which is certainly true enough, I mean, he's not very religious."

And you knew what he meant: the faith was of the heart, not of the formalities.

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Maybe that's a way to begin. You don't have to be Jewish to like Levy's rye bread. You don't have to be straight to like orange juice. And you don't have to be denominational or even devotional to know that television has an enormous power, both actual and potential, to shape the way we all see and think about ourselves and each other. It can force us to be eye-witnesses to our own cruelties, failures and frailties. But it can also put us in touch with our common humanity and remind us of our idealism, our aspirations, the heritage of hopes we carry forward into new and usually troubled times.

All too often the tremendous power of television is celebrated negatively--a sort of ongoing black massacre by both the critics and the consumers of everything in the medium that is exploitive and meanly commercial, soothing and diverting sometimes, but uninspired, unrewarding, unmemorable and dispiriting in its sameness.

Yet all that is only part of the television picture. The sense of the meeting this noontime, and the impulse which brought the Humanitas Prize into being three years ago, is that television can indeed find its voice and speak to the real possibilities of love and compassion and hope in our lives.

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The goal of the Humanitas Prize is to identify and to celebrate those triumphant revelations of television's positive power to deal with the human condition with an eloquence that reaches and moves a mass audience.

This year something more than 180 scripts were submitted and considered for the three awards. Viewing the nine programs that were finalists and looking around this room at the creators who brought the shows into being, you can only conclude that someone out there has been watering and replanting the wasteland.

(What ought to encourage us all is that, like most reclamation projects, it seems to pay off commercially, so that the iron laws of the marketplace by which television must live are observed along with the golden rules of life and art.)

I'm thinking of David Wolper, Stan Margulies, Bill Blinn, James Lee and M. Charles Cohen and their associates whose venturesome production of "Roots" kept the whole country rooted to its sets for a whole week.

And Grant Tinker, Earl Pomerantz, and producers James Brooks, Allan Burns, Stan Daniels and Ed. Weinberger, whose Mary Tyler Moore show of blessed memory found the humor, the poignance

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and the encouragement in the life of a credible modern woman making her way in a world of insecure men. And Jerry McNeely at MTM who wrote and produced one of the year's quite remarkable shows.

And Lee Rich, Earl Hamner, Jack Miller, and their friends at Lorimar whose "The Waltons" gives proof through the night that the family is still the rock on which the society rests.

Norman Lear, Larry Rhine, Mel Tolkin, Milt Josefsberg, Mort Lachman and Tandem Productions keep looking at more irascible families than that mountain ever knew, but beneath the snarls the message is still that we are all in the family.

The team at MASH, one of our winners last year, including Gene Reynolds, Burt Metcalfe, Allan Katz, Don Reo and Alan Alda, continue to find amidst the insanity of war not only the humor both of the craziness which preserves sanity but glimpses of the compassion and concern and the need for understanding which transcend the boundaries of war.

We might all agree, more I hope than we do about the movies, that television is a producer's medium. The responsibility for sustaining a series through many directors and writers belongs to the producers. But the Humanitas Prizes go to the writers. Why?

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Partly, of course, because the play's the thing, as someone has had occasion to say before. But principally because, amidst all the intimidating and defeating pressures of time and cost and quantity in television, the drive to be different--to probe deeper into the lives of men and women, to reach up and reach out, to wrestle with the big themes of life and death and pain and loss and hope--must be the writer's, and can be the writer's.

If the writer is lucky, he or she finds the producer who shares the vision and the willingness to push against the expectations of the lowest common denominator to create uncommon television. But the time and the effort and the dream belong to the writer.

And looking around the room again you see writers in whom the dream persists and who've been here before: David Seltzer, a winner our first year, a finalist again last year and now again assisted by producer-director John Erdman and Phil Capice and Lee Rich at Lorimar, M. Charles Cohen who was also a winner the first year.

The congratulations to all the nominees are, like the work, heartfelt.

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Daily commercial television is now into its fourth decade in this country. Many of us in this awards program and in this room share the certain hope (and the perhaps less certain belief) that the audience is coming of age; is more quickly impatient with inferior goods (as witness the ever-shrinking life expectancy of series that did not mean to be mini).

The real hope underlying the Humanitas Prize is that the creative community within the television industry will be encouraged to nourish the rising expectations of the audience, to write and produce to the highest common denominator the medium can command.

Television is the mass medium of communications, the most potent the world has yet known. We all know how rotton it can be. We gather here today to remind ourselves and anyone else who will listen that television can also be, as Father Kieser said when he first announced these awards, a liberating influence, showing us our choices and challenging us to take charge of our lives.

I'll now let Ray Bradbury take charge of ours again.

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