

Ellwood E. Kieser, C.S.P. Luncheon, 1976

The Purpose of the Humanitas Prize

When Charles Williams, John Furia, Jim Moser, Arthur Hiller and I announced the Humanitas Prize at a press luncheon in this room two years ago, we had great hopes but really very little in the way of concrete expectations.

The hopes flowed from a recognition of television's power. When properly used, it is, after the human family, in our opinion, the most powerful humanizing instrument ever known to man.

We were, and are, convinced that television can reveal to us, its viewers, much of what it means to be human. It can challenge us to use our freedom to grow, develop, and become more fully human. It can illumine the options we face. And most important of all, by bringing into our living rooms human beings who are very different from ourselves in culture, race, lifestyle, political loyalties and religious beliefs, it can dissolve the walls of ignorance and fear that separate us from one another.

By involving us in their lives, it can give us an experience of our common humanity, so that we can feel as well as know that we are brothers and sisters of one another.

Yet, when we established the prize, we didn't know what to expect. We were not sure how the industry would respond. We did not know to what extent the industry's writers were ready, able or willing to probe beneath the surface of human life, reach for its meaning, and explore its underlying values. We did not know whether the recognition and financial compensation of a prize would encourage them to move in that direction. Nor did we know whether it was realistic in a medium that is essentially entertainment and often crassly commercial to hope to do a humanizing job.

That was two years ago. Let me just say that what has happened in the interim has done much to reinforce our hopes. And it has given us some very concrete expectations of what the Humanitas Prize can and cannot do for the industry—and through the industry, for the American viewing public.

What we can now confidently hope for and realistically expect is exemplified by the creative people in this room.

I'm thinking of Kathleen Hite, Earl Hamner, and the Lorimar crew. Week after week, your Waltons does a humanizing job. I'm thinking of Jay Allen, and Carol and Nigel McKeand. Your mini-series Family took a good hard look at the dynamics of a contemporary family. You should be proud of it. I'm delighted you're able to continue it. I'm thinking of Larry Gelbart, Gene Reynolds and Bert Prelutsky of MASH. It has a lot to say about men and women trying very hard to preserve their humanity in an essentially dehumanizing situation. And it says it so very well.

I'm thinking of Seth Freeman and Paul Wayne of Doc and the entire MTM stable. The characters in your stories are always vulnerable. I like that.

I'm thinking of Jeanne Houston who lived the story of Manzanar and of her husband, Jim, who helped her tell it. I'm also thinking of John Korty who co-authored the screenplay with the Houstons, and who

directed it, and who also directed Miss Jane Pittman—in my opinion, one of the most humanizing programs ever produced in America.

I'm thinking of Bob Collins and his Medical Story, a stinging indictment of thingification in American life.

And I'm thinking of David Seltzer and David Sontag whose My Father's House explores so well the central human dilemma for so very many of our generation. We're glad to see you back, David. He won the Humanitas Prize last year, for Larry.

And I'm delighted to notice that of our finalists, four are women. American TV needs the feminine dimension.

You know that you are not alone in the entertainment community with these humanizing concerns. What you may not know is that millions of people across the country appreciate what you are doing. They share your concerns with human values. And many of them are ready to put their bodies on the line to see that TV's power is used to enrich rather than degrade the human family.

They know that the air waves do not belong to the networks. Nor do they belong to the local stations. They belong to the people. And so, they must be used for the benefit of the people.

Many of these humanizers have found local community groups. Politically quite sophisticated, they are entering into meaningful dialogue with their local stations to see that their local community needs are being met in a humanizing fashion.

Strange as it may seem at first glance, this heightening of human consciousness is also happening among some broadcasters, at both the network and local levels. Many of them are becoming increasingly aware of their responsibilities to their audiences. And they are beginning to face the hard questions: how much money is enough? At what point does a profit margin become immoral? To whom should the nation's programmers be first and foremost responsible— to their stockholders, or to the people who own the airwaves and view their programs?

I guess what I'm trying to say is that I see surfacing all over the country, with local community groups, in the broadcast community and also in the entertainment community here in Hollywood, a new appreciation of human values, a new recognition of television's power to affirm or deny them, a new awareness that in television programming, enriching people is more important than selling things.

This kind of thinking is, of course, not yet dominant. And let's be realistic. It may never become dominant. But still, it does give me hope. Lighting the single candle is still better than cursing the darkness.

The Humanitas Prize did not create this new awareness. But, in a very real way, I think it reflects it. And hopefully, it furthers it.

With limited resources, we have chosen to concentrate on writers, for two reasons. First, because the value orientation of a script begins in their minds, hearts and unconscious. And secondly, because the writer seems to need us most. Most writers work alone. It's so easy for them to become discouraged, to feel that no one cares about the artistic and humanizing integrity of what they write. We hope that the Humanitas Prize lets them know that someone does care— a lot.

Singling out the writer for the cash award is not to minimize the importance of the director, producer and story editor in the creation of a good show. That's why they receive a non-monetary award. It's just that we had to begin somewhere, and we decided to begin at the beginning.

What criteria do we use in evaluating the scripts? How do we decide who wins the Humanitas Prize?

Like any producer or story editor we are concerned about story development and depth of characterization. But we also have other concerns: how contemporary and relevant is the story's theme? How deeply, honestly does it explore that theme? What is the story saying about the meaning of human life? Is it challenging its viewers to use their freedom to realize their full human potential? Does it affirm the dignity of the human person? Are we taken deep inside the characters in the story? Do we care about them? Is the overall impact of the story conducive to an understanding and love for other people? In other words, what effect will this story have on its viewers? Will it illumine their search for meaning, freedom and love? Will it help them become more fully human?

Gentleman and ladies, the shows you have written, directed and produced have met these criteria. That's why they are finalists for the Humanitas Prize. They are humanizing programs. In the name of the executive committee of the Human Family Institute and of its Board of Trustees, I congratulate you. In my own name, I'd just like to say that I wish we had nine prizes to give today. Congratulations again.