

The Goals of the Humanitas Prize

While we are singling out three writers today, and their work, I'd like to pay tribute to all the nominees, and to all the writers who participated. The purpose of the Humanitas Prize embraces all of them, and all their work. Writers communicate. Felicitously or not; from the conscious mind, or not; with conscience, or not, writers have a challenging impact on our society and therefore an awesome responsibility.

The Humanitas Prize honors writers and programs which have rejected the concept of television as a visual anesthetic and which, instead, have humanized programming. The specifics of their work and their own views will find expression in the announcements and interviews, but I'd like to take a moment to underscore what that phrase, "humanizing programming" means.

We believe that television can help to do three things for its audience. It can expand the knowledge of what it means to be human. It can contribute to the growth of freedom. And it can unify the Human Family. When it does those three things, TV is a servant to humanity, not a parasite.

Television delivers information and facts, with speed and skill, but it can do much more. It can convey the significance of facts. It can present ideas, values, perspective. Television can communicate meaning. But the best of Television does more than merely present values and ideas and meaning. It involves us. It gives us something we can actually experience. The negative aspects of that can be frightening. Experiencing violence can dull our perception of pain and anguish and fear. But in a positive way, the programs we honor today show us how other people live their lives; what problems confront them, and how they try to solve them; what things they value, and what they don't. From such programs we can find a new perspective for our own lives.

This is what I mean by "expanding the knowledge of what it means to be human." What it is like to be a man or woman, adolescent or a child living in this world, finding a meaning to life, and trying to live it fully.

The growth of freedom that I mentioned is not only a freedom of the society, but of each one of us as thinking, choosing human beings. Programs, such as those we honor, force us to think, and confront us with new choices. Choices about individual responsibility, about the hunger and danger and fear of our fellow human beings, about the rightness and wrongness of things. By throwing light on our choices and involving us with new dimensions of our problems and new arguments pro and con of what to do about them, we are more free to be ourselves.

Finally these programs help to unite the Human Family. By seeing ourselves in the needs and fears and joys of others we come to appreciate that we are the same. We relate to others losing a job, loving a child, fearing death, reaching out to someone who needs help. From this visceral experience, we recognize that those who differ vastly from us in race, religion, life-style and culture...are still brothers and sisters.

The Humanitas Prize is meant to encourage and support writers whose work makes this deeply human commitment. It is our hope that the prize itself will also grant them the economic freedom to reach the height of their artistic and humanizing power.

We hope that the recognition given today will inspire in tomorrow's television the knowledge that the human condition is painful...and beautiful. That it will illumine human freedom as a challenge and will lead to a richer experience of our common humanity.